

Keith's

Wife



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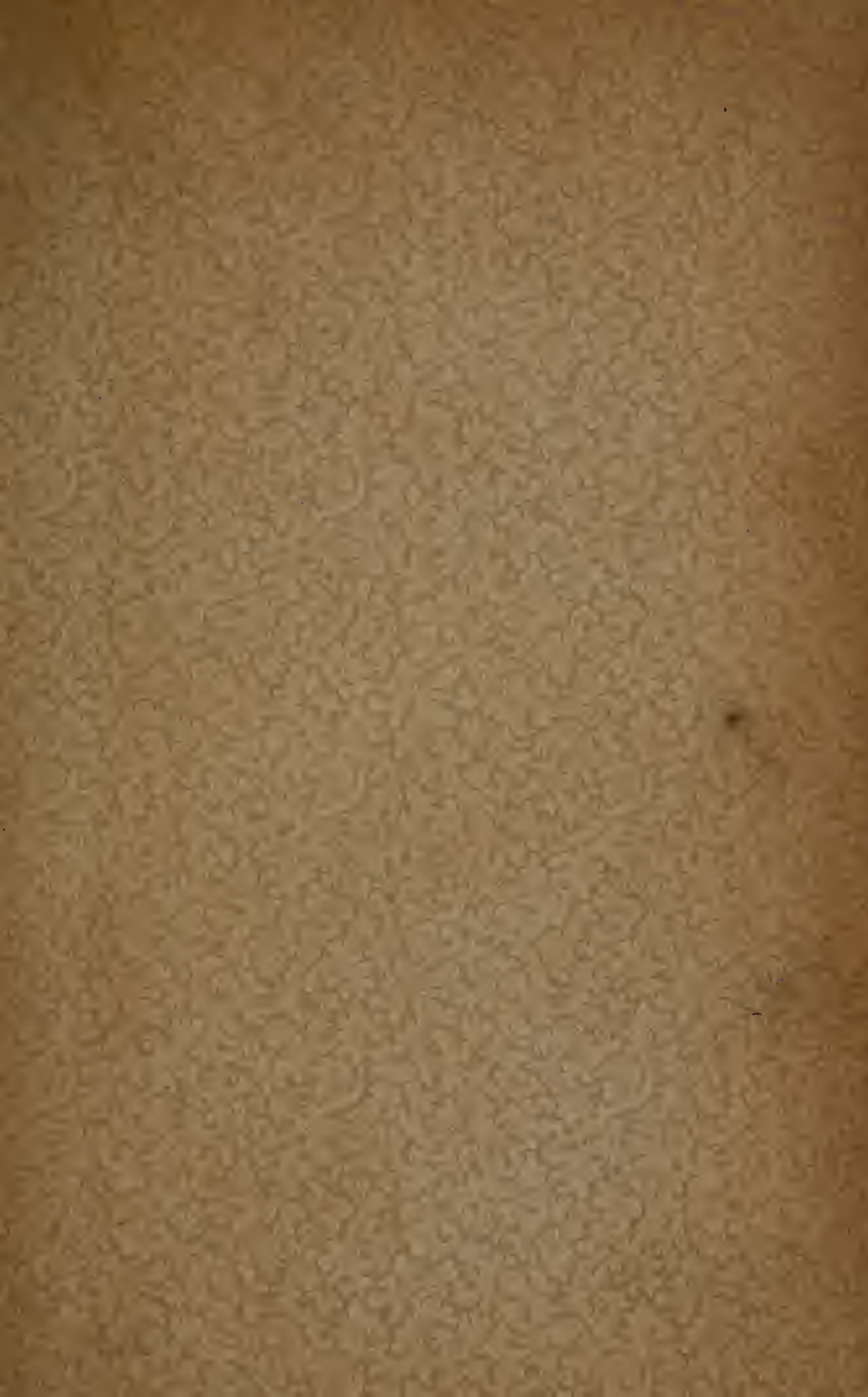


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KEITH'S WIFE.

A Novel.

BY

LADY VIOLET GREVILLE,

AUTHOR OF

“ZOE,” “FAITHS AND FASHIONS,” ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.



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KEITH'S WIFE.

CHAPTER I.

DOROTHY SHOWS CAPRICE.

‘**D**OROTHY!’
She started up, rubbing her eyes, and feeling exceedingly confused and doubtful, as memory struggled into consciousness.

‘Dorothy!’ came again the cry, this time in a louder key.

‘I am coming,’ she said, striving to speak calmly and naturally, though the sound of Keith’s voice made her shiver.

‘Why, you are dressed!’ he remarked wonderingly. ‘Have you not been to bed yet?—surely it is morning?’

‘I fell asleep in my chair,’ she replied briefly, taking up a bottle of medicine to hide her discomposure, and marvelling inwardly how she could have slept.

‘What o’clock is it? Shall I take my draught? I think I should like some tea.’

‘It is only six o’clock,’ she said, consulting her watch, which was still going; ‘le Goui will bring it at the usual hour, I suppose.’

‘How light it is already!’ Keith turned wearily on his pillow. ‘If it is so early I suppose I must try to sleep again a little.’

‘I suppose you must,’ she said, still in that voice of rigidly regulated calm.

‘Kiss me, dear.’ She stooped obediently, just touching his forehead with her lips; then she turned away and quickly passed into the next room, shutting the door of communication carefully behind her. Arrived there, she halted, cold and shivering, with a determination to think over matters carefully. It was evidently no dream, as in the first instant of awakening she had devoutly hoped. There upon the table, near her burnt-out candle and her open travelling-bag, lay the bundle of letters in confusion; the blue ribbon that had tied them together; the miniature case with Ida’s portrait; and on one side, just as she had

tossed it from her, the paper written in Joynte's hand, creased and crumpled from her own convulsive grasp, obtruding its hateful existence upon her. With newborn energy she lighted a match, seized the paper, holding it gingerly, as though it were possessed of some strange stinging power, and set fire to it. As soon as the fire sprang up and curled round her hand, she threw the paper into the grate, and watched the greedy flames consume it. Presently nothing remained of it but a few black flaky fragments, and with a deep sigh she sank into a chair. The written accusation no longer existed, the crooked characters haunted her no more with their terrible meaning; yet what had she gained by thus destroying the tangible proofs of crime, when its meaning was graven upon her heart, when her faith and her ignorance had alike vanished? She gathered the letters slowly together, tying them up with the blue ribbon, and laying them neatly by the miniature-case, with the intention of replacing them in the bureau at the first convenient opportunity. And while she busied herself thus mechanically, even taking off her dress and preparing to go to bed in order to escape Trimmer's keen and critical eye, a resolution which during the last hour lay dormant in her

mind gathered strength and coherence, gradually assuming practical proportions. The doctrine so persistently preached by Mr. Maynard recurred to her memory, the outcome, as he deemed it, of his great Lord and Master's teaching, to which Dorothy had once vehemently refused to assent. It rose before her now, as the huge soulless Moloch to which frail humanity must inevitably bow.

Self-sacrifice ! The very word meant sorrow, sadness, suffering. Dorothy had refused to hear the call ; had persisted in taking more purely personal views of life ; had sought happiness in wilful fashion. And now, the inevitable forced itself upon her in a far more real and unbearable shape than that presented to her by the good Vicar. To share in the advantages of a crime was to her an utterly distasteful notion ; to bruise her own heart, and trample on her own love, the only possible solution. Keith had sinned from the lowest motive, for greed ; he had not even repented, but he had sought to drag another soul with him down into degradation, —Dorothy's soul, hitherto pure and innocent. For unconscious participation was still a participation from which her conscience recoiled. Fate had saved her for its own mysterious

purpose. And he? He must expiate. Those who had strength to sin, must have courage to endure shame. Shame, and Keith! Oh, no—no; she could not bear it! The very thought stung like a viper's tongue. Still she could not, dared not, share the results of his crime. She would go away quite quietly somewhere, tell no living soul—not even the mother, who would surely be harsh in her judgments—shroud the secret in her own heart, guard her husband's cankered reputation, foolishly loving him because she could not help it, but resigning all hopes of happiness. Tears rolled silently down her cheeks at these thoughts—tears of self-pity, with which her eyes were wet. But though she continued to weep over her misery, her resolve only grew more fixed and lusty.

In a little while Trimmer knocked softly at the door, bringing a cup of tea and some letters in her hand. She exclaimed to find the curtains undrawn, and Dorothy lying in bed, with large eyes wide and wakeful, and the traces of her sleepless night and scarcely wiped tears still on her face.

‘Haven't you slept well, ma'am?’ she asked, with the astonished anxiety of a servant whose hearty supper and plethoric tempera-

ment induces sound sleep, and makes her incredulous of others' wakefulness.

‘Not very well; I have a headache.’ Dorothy put her hand to her eyes, in order to escape further questioning.

‘Dear me, ma’am, that’s a great pity; for the people about are all agog, expecting you and Mr. Keith in the village presently; and they are ready to cheer, and the flags a-flying and a brass-band playing already!’

‘Oh, I had forgotten! Of course, the rejoicings——’ said Dorothy, seized with a speechless terror at the mere vision of such incongruous proceedings.

‘It seems the village was never in such a commotion before; it is even worse than when Lady Mandrake’s daughter was married, though that was a business, goodness knows! and the funeral of her husband coming so soon after, too; and the poor young lady stepping from orange-flowers into widow’s weeds, as it were!’ pursued Trimmer, folding and tidying as she talked. ‘Mr. Flint is to read an address, and Mrs. Horsfall’s little girl to present you with a nosegay——’

‘What is to be done?’ ejaculated Dorothy wearily.

‘Done, ma’am! You won’t have much to

do but to dress smart ; there's a deal of dress expected on these occasions. It would have taken place last night when you arrived, only Miss Margaret said she was quite sure Mr. Chester would be tired out and might be displeased.'

'Yes, indeed he would,' said Dorothy quickly, rejoicing that at least she had been hitherto spared this ordeal. Still it was all to come, and by what possibility could she escape it?

When Trimmer had finished tidying, and her orderly fingers had put everything into its proper place, she left the room. Dorothy, again alone, pushed back her heavy hair from her forehead, and exerted herself to rise. What her future conduct must be she scarcely knew; only of one thing she was certain, that the chain binding her to her present state of life must be broken as quickly as possible, and that she must without delay listen to the imperative commands of her own conscience. Mr. Maynard's advice would have been of the greatest possible service to her at this juncture, but she could not send for him without telling him all the truth, and to this revelation she had decided no temptation or feeling of personal weakness, should lead her. Meanwhile, if

she could only gain a little time to mature her plans she must think seriously. But thinking hurt her, and it was no fancied throbbing that beat like the strokes of a hammer on her temples. She was dressed at last, but this morning she did not, as usual, kneel down and say her prayers. A feeling of bitterness and disappointment ruled her tyrannically. She could not endure meekly to bow her head and murmur the daily petition, 'Thy will be done.' Self-denial was evidently a duty, but no joy. She had been injured in her pride, her love, and her self-respect, but she could scarcely be said to have erred. Under these circumstances she chafed against an attitude of humility and resignation. Trimmer had insisted on Dorothy wearing one of her best gowns—the day was bright and beautiful, like a tardy lingering of perfect summer—and besides, she must remember the rejoicings. Dorothy, thinking dress the veriest trifle, in the face of her great grief, quietly consented. Margaret had herself arranged to come up for breakfast (the expectation of amusement tempting her to rise sooner than usual), and Keith in consequence made the effort of an early toilette, and descended to the dining-room. Dorothy carefully timed her appearance so as to avoid a *tête-à-*

tête with her husband, while Margaret's lively presence obviated all chances of unpleasant silence. Margaret, suffused with dimples and smiles, looked, in her pale blue cotton gown and dainty frills, the veriest embodiment of sunshine, and poor Dorothy, weary and worn with the night's conflict, felt grateful to her for her bright assistance.

‘What time shall you be ready for the reception?’ asked Margaret. ‘I have just been telling Keith all about our preparations.’

‘Keith is really not strong enough for so much fatigue,’ said Dorothy, taking her seat at the breakfast-table, and looking anxiously across to her husband, who had heaped his plate with bacon and eggs, and seemed prepared with a good appetite. He looked rested, too, and considerably less languid than usual.

‘I can stand the fatigue quite well to-day,’ he said cheerfully. ‘I wish Palis had been here though, to help me through with it; he is a host in himself. These kind of things are a deuce of a bore, and I believe he really likes them. However, I suppose it pleases people, and if I am to stand for Parliament some day, it is as well to take every opportunity of making one's self popular.’

‘Certainly.’ Margaret nodded her head approvingly.

‘But to-morrow would be better,’ urged Dorothy timidly, feeling as if Fate must always be too strong for her.

‘No; the triumphal arches will be faded by to-morrow, and Mrs. Horsfall’s little girl, who has not slept from excitement for a week, would be dreadfully disappointed,’ interrupted Margaret; ‘besides, the band is engaged, and the Odd Fellows are to turn out. No, no, Dorothy; you must not think of such a thing. Why, you are a regular kill-joy, and would deprive everybody of a treat.’

‘By-the-bye, I must speak to Flint about the tenants’ dinner,’ Keith remarked, while Dorothy sat silently pouring herself out some tea; ‘we must do *something* for the people in return.’

‘Let’s roast a live ox, and have a May-pole and all sorts of things,’ said Margaret eagerly.

‘Roast a whole ox, I suppose you mean, you little goose!’ responded Keith, laughing at her enthusiasm. ‘You shall have anything you like, Margaret. I appoint you master of the ceremonies.’

‘That will be nice. You may trust me to spend plenty of money, and make everyone

happy. Why, Dorothy,' as her eyes suddenly rested on her sister's face, 'what is the matter with you? You do look pale, quite ghastly; and you always used to have such a nice complexion, exactly like a rose-leaf.'

'I did not sleep well last night,' murmured Dorothy, feeling herself blanch under her sister's good-humoured but unsentimental scrutiny; 'and do, Keith, please, put off the rejoicings till to-morrow!'

'Not on account of me, Dorothy,' he answered imperturbably. 'I assure you I feel far better than I have ever done since the commencement of my detestable fever, and you never mind fatigue.'

'No; you were always the strong one of the family, and able to sit up reading and studying. Come and take a turn in the garden, Keith,' coaxed Margaret, when they rose from table, Dorothy pushing aside the tea which she had scarcely tasted, and the piece of toast she had been engaged in idly crumbling between her fingers. 'There are a number of roses still, and such a delicious bed of mignonette, besides quantities of cherry-pie, which I begged the gardener to plant. Come, Keith.'

Keith needed no coaxing. He had always been partial to his lively sister-in-law, and

to-day Dorothy seemed dull and incomprehensible.

‘What time shall we go to the village?’ Margaret called out, as she stepped over the window-sill. ‘Settle it, Dorothy, will you? They are all anxiously waiting to know. Hadn’t we better have an early luncheon, and give up to the people the whole of the afternoon?—that will tire you least, Keith.’

‘As you please, dear,’ said Keith, who was in high good-humour, feeling himself the hero of the hour, and gratified at the attention he was receiving.

They departed, talking gaily; and Dorothy returned to her own room, now quite deserted and set in order, and smelling sweetly of the jessamine that climbed on the wall outside. She would gladly have burst into tears, her heart was so overcharged with sorrow: she could even, with the least encouragement, have sobbed on the prim Trimmer’s shoulder, as on a rock of refuge, had the latter been present; for she was thoroughly dispirited and miserable.

But this could not be. Her strange grief was one that must be nursed in solitude. The life she genuinely appreciated, the delights of a luxurious home, glowing garden-

beds, and pleasant park-like grounds, the advantage of marriage with a good-looking young man who loved her, the noisy rejoicings in her honour made by poorer neighbours—all these she must renounce for as lonely and wretched a lot as that of the veriest outcast in the land, and the decision must be taken irrevocably and quickly. From her window she could see Keith and her sister slowly pacing along the terrace, stopping now to admire a flower-bed or examine a shrub, now resuming their merry walk, while the swift echoes of Margaret's laughter lightly reached her ears. Into this healthful happiness her resolution must break, like a bombshell bursting over an innocent and unsuspecting town, shattering hope and joy, and bringing fear and desolation in its train. She stayed watching the pair till le Goui, coming out bareheaded with a note and a message, summoned them in. Doubtless the message was to announce Mr. Flint's presence and readiness to receive orders for the tenants' dinner. Not a moment was to be lost. Dorothy pressed her hands firmly against her beating heart, and swiftly descended the softly-carpeted stairs.

At the library-door she stopped, hearing

the sound of voices. For one brief doubting second only, however; this was not the time to hesitate. She turned the handle, and pushed open the door. Her husband and Mr. Flint sat talking, and both looked up, surprised at her entrance. Mr. Flint, remembering her bridal status, bowed effusively, and uttered a pretty speech referring to youth, love, and beauty. Dorothy reddened, thinking that to-morrow he would see cause to speak very differently.

‘If you are busy,’ she said gravely, addressing Keith, ‘I will not detain you. I only wished to ask you to put off the people’s reception till to-morrow.’

‘Till to-morrow!’ Mr. Flint and Keith simultaneously ejaculated.

‘Till to-morrow,’ said poor Dorothy, vainly trying to find efficacious words. ‘I am tired, and I am sure it will knock you up, and—and, in short, I particularly wish it.’

‘Under those circumstances,’ Mr. Flint bowed respectfully, ‘there can of course be no question : the reception must be deferred.’

‘Dorothy, this is absurd,’ said Keith irritably. ‘I told you before I felt quite well enough; and there is no possible reason for this sudden caprice.’

‘I have my reasons,’ answered Dorothy quietly.

Mr. Flint now soothingly remarked, gathering that there was some unknown domestic disturbance at work :

‘Ladies, you know, sir, must never be hurried. Perhaps Mrs. Chester’s toilettes are not unpacked.’

‘Let Trimmer unpack them at once ; she is paid wages for the purpose.’ Keith spoke in a commanding tone. ‘What on earth is the use of a servant if she cannot be ready when she is wanted ? Where is Trimmer ? I will ring for her at once.’

‘Pray do not blame Trimmer,’ said Dorothy meekly ; ‘it is not her fault. It is entirely, as you said, *my* caprice—I do not feel well. I cannot go through the rejoicings to-day.’

‘But really, Dorothy, you are unpardonable.’

Mr. Flint again interposed.

‘Surely, sir, it would be ungallant to insist with a lady—it would distress us all. We can easily defer the arrangements, and explain to everyone concerned that Mrs. Chester is fatigued with her journey—it is such a natural result. Have you any other orders for me, madam ?’

‘None,’ said Dorothy, whose gratitude

evinced itself in the feeblest radiance of a smile. That smile, evidently the guerdon of his obligingness, completely captivated Mr. Flint. He informed his wife, at tea the same evening, that Mrs. Chester's beauty was astonishing, and her manners graciousness itself. Mrs. Flint, who had the feminine faculty of depreciating ladies she had known familiarly, merely shrugged her shoulders and contemptuously pouted a little at this announcement, any further satirical remarks on her part being cut short by the urgent solicitations of baby, whom she was successfully rearing on a liberal diet and abundance of porter.

As soon as Dorothy had left the room, and the reflection of her smile had died away from the responsive countenance of Mr. Flint, he resumed his former business-like expression, and said :

‘I suppose, then, that is decided. I had better go at once and inform the people of the change in your plans. After all, a pleasure deferred is a pleasure redoubled ; and Mrs. Chester *did* seem fatigued.’

‘I don't know what was the matter,’ said Keith drily ; ‘nor, indeed, does it seem to me that a woman ever knows her own mind for two minutes consecutively.’



CHAPTER II.

DOROTHY RETURNS TO THE ANGEL HOUSE.

THE day dragged slowly away. Margaret laughed and joked indefatigably with Keith, but her jokes fell flat, and there was no responsive merriment on his part. A kind of gulf seemed to separate husband and wife; by a tacit consent they exchanged together only necessary words, and avoided each other's society. The remotest suspicion of the truth certainly never crossed Keith's mind. He only felt it exceedingly disagreeable that when his health permitted and his inclination prompted, Dorothy should suddenly exhibit unaccountable caprice and a desire to thwart his wishes. As for any real reasons on her part, of course he did not believe in them. Women were always impulsive and unreason-

able, though, with the exception of a display of silly jealousy, which might be set down to youthful ignorance of life, he could not really saddle Dorothy with any serious faults.

He determined, at any rate, not to lower himself by descending to argument, but rather sensibly to profit by Margaret's easy and light-hearted companionship. Still a strange discomfort troubled him, and he was relieved when the long summer's day drew to its close, and Margaret went home, escorted by the footman.

The weather continued perfect ; there was a luscious warmth in the still air that disposed to pleasant inaction, and made the mere fact of existence desirable. They had sat chiefly in the garden, where the long shadows lay motionless across the bright green grass, and the scent of the mignonette attracted busy booming bees ; they had drunk tea and tasted of juicy peaches, and spent the afternoon in luxurious fashion, and yet, with the exception of Margaret, whose mood was governed entirely by external circumstances, no one had really found pleasure in any of these things.

Dorothy retired as soon as her sister had started to go home, fervently hoping to be spared any explanation with her husband.

This was not unlikely, from the fact that le Goui invariably, since his master's illness, assisted at the latter's evening toilette, and that Trimmer never left Dorothy till she had seen her arrayed in her muslin dressing-gown, and let her shining hair down to fall in waves around her shoulders. Provided Keith did not call (and if he were sleepy he might not), the door of communication could easily remain closed, and thus all conjugal talk be avoided. It seemed as if this were to be, for though Dorothy listened intently as soon as Trimmer had departed, she could no longer hear le Goui stirring.

She breathed more freely, but kept still, for fear of attracting to her Keith's attention. She sat on, motionless, in front of her dressing-glass, with hands crossed in her lap, waiting until she heard the final sounds which denoted the retirement of the household—the footman with harshly creaking shoes marching down the passage to put out the lights, and the slamming doors, like a retreating echo, dying away behind him. For some time longer she sat quiet, her heart beating loud and audibly in the stillness, till she felt sure Keith must be asleep. Then she rose, fetched pen and paper, and began to write. When

she had finished (the task took a considerable time) she folded and directed her letter, and laid it in a prominent place on the table. In the afternoon she had restored the packet of letters and the miniature-case to its place in the bureau, and there remained now only her personal preparations to be consummated. She went into the anteroom outside, where she had noticed a small portmanteau, which, though emptied of its contents by Trimmer, had not yet been removed. This portmanteau Dorothy quietly dragged into her room, and proceeded to fill with linen and various garments—only the very plainest and simplest of her gowns—a black one—and a warm cloak. The portmanteau was small, but it sufficed for her wants. Besides this she took a plaid shawl, a small travelling-bag, into which she put her purse and some personal jewellery of no great value. Then she dressed herself in a dark grey merino, and sat down again till the first rays of daylight crept slowly through the curtains. She was going away, with the intention of placing an irrevocable barrier between herself and Keith ; she was taking a great plunge at the behest of duty, into the chill and unsympathetic world. She must never hope to be happy, perhaps never

even be at peace again. The hour was indeed sad and solemn.

Sweet memories crowded upon her mind, sweeping away the sense of present evils, till the accumulated emotions and pent-up restraint of the day found vent in bitter welling tears, that forced themselves quietly through her lashes, and dropped in widening blotches on her gown. She let herself cry for a little, it soothed and did her good; but presently she dried her tears, put on her hat and cloak, and taking up her plaid and hand-bag, crept to Keith's door.

'Good-bye,' she murmured softly—'good-bye, my dear love.' He could not hear—yet only that thin door stood between her and happiness.

When she emerged into the passage, the house was perfectly still, except for the twitter of awaking birds pluming themselves in the branches, the sound of which came faintly through the windows of the hall. With a light firm step, having put away in that good-bye all her last weakness of regret, she descended the stairs, and unbarred the front door as cleverly and noiselessly as she could. Once in the open air, the damp freshness of the atmosphere (the dew was clinging closely to the

blades of grass) restored her a little, for she was feeling faint, and she proceeded with a brisker energy to trudge down the avenue.

It was now about six o'clock, and as she passed through the lodge and turned into the high-road she began to meet labourers going to their daily work. One or two recognised her, stared a little, and awkwardly touched their caps; others passed her by with a 'Mornin', miss!' At the friendly familiarity she crimsoned, and hastened her steps till she reached the Angel House.

How pretty the little garden looked, beneath the bright caresses of the morning sunbeams; the sunflowers and dahlias stood wet and glistening with dew, and a shower of crystal drops from the clematis fell on her head as she passed beneath the porch. Sarah was up, cleaning the passage and steps. She gave a start of astonishment as she beheld Dorothy, and cried out:

'Lord save us, is it you?'

'Yes, it is I,' said Dorothy. 'Hush! don't make a noise.'

'And to think of your coming in like that, for all the world like a ghost, just when I was cleaning up early so as to go to the home-coming, and see all the sights!'

By this time Sarah was wiping the soap-suds off her arms with her apron, and indulging in prolonged and curious stares.

‘Is my mother awake? I want to go to her.’

‘Dear me, no, ma’am; she is never called till half-past seven.’

‘What shall I do, then?’ thought Dorothy vaguely, aloud.

‘Well, I don’t rightly know, ma’am. Maybe you’d step into the kitchen and take a cup of tea; cook is down,’ suggested Sarah, puzzling her poor head profoundly to find a reason for the bride’s apparition alone, and on foot, at this early hour. Such solitary expeditions did not enter at all into Sarah’s conception of the privileges of matrimony, and she wondered what construction the baker’s young man, who was courting her, would give to such vagaries when she told him.

Dorothy assented to Sarah’s proposal, knowing of no more agreeable method to pass the time till Mrs. Strait’s waking, and followed her into the kitchen. Cook was equally astonished, but less demonstrative in her surprise, which was soon merged in concern for the young lady’s comfort.

The kitchen was pleasant enough; a bright fire burnt in the grate, and the kettle hummed

comfortably. Dorothy thought of her cake-making days, seemingly removed into a blurred and indefinite past.

‘Sit ye down, ma’am, there,’ said cook, who was homely and kind, having attained a habit of authority in the exercise of her profession, which, coupled with the fact that she had lost her husband and buried six children, as she said, ‘gave her a *right* to speak!’ ‘Why, you’re all of a tremble, and your cheeks as white as white. If furrin’ travel does that for folk, all I can say is, let ’em stay at home.’

‘Thank you,’ said Dorothy gratefully, when cook, while volubly talking, removed her gloves, chafed her cold hands, and stirred the fire to a brighter blaze.

‘These ’ere mornings do seem fresh-like, and I warrant you’ve tasted nothing this blessed day.’

Dorothy shook her head.

‘Poor lamb! Well, take this tea—it’s the best two-and-sixpenny—and drink it now, do.’

Dorothy drank eagerly. Material comfort, warmth, quiet, and the honest attentions of the old servant, were what she needed most just then. Her head was too tired for much perplexing thought, and her heart ached with suffering. By the time she had finished her

tea, and cook had crooned over her in simple hearty fashion, Sarah returned to say that Mrs. Strait was awake.

Dorothy rose.

‘I must go now, cook ; but thank you for all your kindness.’

‘No need, ma’am, you’re most welcome. I’m sure I’ve only done my dooty, and you don’t look fit for much still.’

‘Indeed, I am quite well,’ answered Dorothy, as she followed Sarah upstairs.

The latter threw open the bedroom door, but immediately retired to the kitchen premises, evincing thus a greater delicacy and reluctance to intrude upon the interesting meeting of mother and child than might have been expected from an unsophisticated servant-girl.

‘Dorothy ! *you* here, at this early hour !’ Mrs. Strait cried from her bed, steadying her little lace nightcap with one hand, and raising herself with the other as she spoke, to obtain a better view of her daughter. ‘What *has* happened ? Is Mr. Chester ill ? but no, in that case of course you would not be here. Have I overslept myself ?’

‘Mother !’ said Dorothy, hurrying to the bedside, and twining her arms fondly round her

mother's neck, 'I have come to stay with you—don't send me away.'

'Bless me, child, what do you mean? You surely haven't quarrelled with your husband, which is against the Bible and Prayer-book, for they say there a woman is to obey and have power on her head because of the angels—though why the angels should care whether one wears a bonnet in church or not, I really can't understand; but there—a bonnet *is* lady-like, I confess.'

'Mother, I want to stay with you,' repeated Dorothy, stroking her mother's cheek with the caressing gesture of a child.

'Dear me, dear me! but your husband, what will he say to it? and all the rejoicings, too!'

'I cannot go back—I cannot go back. Don't ask me why, mother; only it cannot be.'

'Just when I thought you were so happy, and so did Margaret too, I'm sure. She told me how you all sat in the garden and eat peaches,' continued Mrs. Strait, in her peevish, puzzled voice; 'and with such a comfortable house, and a good dinner, and all that beautiful fine linen. I declare Mrs. Nutmeg was never tired of showing and admiring it. Dear, dear! how perverse girls are, to be sure!'

Mrs. Strait talked with the same kind of pious regret in her tones as that a hen-wife evinces when the sitting of eggs she has watched over turns out to be addled.

‘I know—I know!’ said poor Dorothy, still coaxing and clasping, though now a trifle less hopefully; ‘but, mother, you must let me stay with you, please.’

‘I can’t keep you from your husband, my dear.’

‘He won’t miss me—he doesn’t want me.’ Dorothy gulped down a sob as she thought of all she had meant to be to him. ‘Only promise to let me stay here!’

‘But just think what people would say, Dorothy; and there’s the expense. You’ve got used to fine clothes now.’

‘Oh, no—no!’ said Dorothy decidedly, remembering how the blue merino had always been her favourite gown, and that at this moment all the worldly goods she chose to keep were contained in one small portmanteau. ‘I don’t care for clothes. I’ll work, and earn money, and help you. I am sure I could give lessons, and now I am married I can go about alone.’

‘With your pretty face! Oh dear! If your poor father, who was so particular, had but

lived!’ moaned Mrs. Strait, hastily dotting up figures in her head, and calculating whether it would be cheaper to have an extra mouth, bringing its own quota to the general fund, to feed or not; for, of course, if Dorothy stayed, as a married woman she would pay for her own living. It was easier to keep house for many than for few; and when Dorothy did not forget everything over her books, she had proved handy enough.

‘Perhaps you’ll soon make it up with your husband, and then he’ll be angry with me for having humoured you,’ she said presently, as the thought struck her. ‘It would not do to anger Mr. Chester, Dorothy, being dependent upon him.’

‘Mother’—Dorothy slid down from the bed, on which hitherto she had been half-sitting, half-lying, with a faint sense of added strength in the erect position—‘Mother,’ she said, ‘I am determined never to go back and live with my husband; and if you will not help me, I must find a home elsewhere. But you *are* sorry for me; you will befriend me, will you not?’

Her cheeks glowed, and Mrs. Strait saw the light of determination in her eyes.

‘Well, well, dear, don’t fuss; it’s ruin to

the complexion, and yours is very delicate. You can stay here a bit if you like, till things get straight; but mind you, I don't take your part against your husband. And what Mrs. Maynard, with her sharp tongue, will make of all this, I am sure I tremble to think. And why did you come so early, flurrying me before breakfast, which always brings on a palpitation? and why didn't you take the carriage?—for Sarah said you had walked.'

'Darling mother!' was all the answer Dorothy vouchsafed, as she stooped and put her lips to her mother's cheek. 'It is so good to be at home again!'

'Well, go now, there's a dear,' said Mrs. Strait, immeasurably relieved to think the trying scene was over; 'go now and talk to Margaret. I'm so confused, I expect I shall not eat a morsel of breakfast; but it is quite time for me to get up.'

But Dorothy did not go to Margaret; she went straight to her own little room, laid her hat and cloak and travelling-bag on the bed, which was unmade, and carelessly piled with blankets, and sitting down by the toilet-table, looked around. Everything was as she had left it: the bookcase with the old gap in it, made by the absence of the 'Imitation' she had

taken away with her; the dimity-covered arm-chair; the rosebud-patterned dimity curtains, pinned back to keep them out of the dust; even the very monthly roses nodding against the casement. Dorothy opened the lattice, and the branch which the pane had confined spread to its natural length, and dropped fragrant dew into the room.

She broke off a rose, and put it in the front of her gown. How peaceful and quiet she could be here. Her brief married life faded into the dimness of the past. Come what might, at least she had chosen the right path, and must abide by it for ever. Keith was not likely to seek her out; he would never wish to see her again, since she had left his house in so abrupt and uncourteous a manner. She wondered if he would suffer. Men did not suffer as much from love as women did, she believed; they had other occupations, other interests. Then she smoothed her hair between her two hands, and looked at the reflection of her pale face in the glass.

At present she did not so much resemble the angel of Fra Angelico's picture as a presentment of our Lady of Dolours, with her calm oval face and sad weary eyes. Nevertheless, when Margaret came down late and good-

tempered as usual, she found, to her astonishment, her sister sitting quietly in the breakfast-room, taking tea from the caddy, and putting in large spoonfuls in the absently reckless fashion of former days, seemingly just as if she had never been married at all.





CHAPTER III.

KEITH ASSERTS HIS AUTHORITY.

THE news of Dorothy's departure was broken to Mr. Chester by le Goui, who brought the letter she had written (which busy Trimmer, much to her bewilderment, had found on the table in her mistress's room) on the salver, with the matutinal cup of tea. Keith at first failed to realize the meaning of the words contained in the letter, though indeed they were plain enough, and written in Dorothy's neatest hand.

‘I am leaving you,’ she said, ‘for ever, as I think it best for both of us. I have heard the story of your past life, and I cannot bear to think of it. If you wish to do what is right, you will immediately return to the

lawful heir the fortune which rightfully belongs to him. But whatever you decide, I know that further intercourse between us could only be miserably painful—in fact, impossible. I feel now as if I should never hold up my head again. I loved you, Keith, so very dearly—I shall go to my mother's for a little; but you need have no fear. My lips will be sealed as to the reason for my leaving you. Let people think what they like; gossip soon dies out. I am not your enemy, Keith, though I can never again be your wife. Oh, Keith, if only things could be different! Pray to heaven for us both, as I shall for you.

‘Your heart-broken

‘DOROTHY.’

‘What did she know?’ Keith pondered. ‘Had Judith told her? Could she have seen her? What had brought about this sudden revelation?’

He jumped up wildly, and shook his fist in the face of an imaginary foe. No one should stand between him and his wife. She *must* come back. He did not intend to lose her so. He was master in his own house, and Squire of Blackness. What did this weak woman mean by setting herself up against his

wishes and his rights? How sick he was of that long-ago story of Judith, which everyone seemed to make it his business to rake up! Joynte, too, had he revenged himself? The thought maddened him; he tried not to believe the worst. He rang his bell loudly; when le Goui entered, in his automatic respectful manner, waiting silently for orders, Keith burst out:

‘Where is Mrs. Chester?—who gave you this? Why the deuce don’t you answer? It is your business to know what goes on in the house.’

‘Mrs. Trimmer gave it me,’ said le Goui, in the measured voice which no surprise or excitement could cause to vary by one semitone. ‘Mrs. Chester left no other message, and went out early this morning before any of the servants were stirring.’

‘Did she take anything with her—luggage, I mean?’

Keith’s voice shook a little.

‘Nothing, sir. But a slip of paper was found pinned to her cushion, with directions for Mrs. Trimmer to forward a small portmanteau to the Angel House, containing, I believe, some of Mrs. Chester’s clothes. It also stated that Mrs. Trimmer’s services would

no longer be required. Mrs. Trimmer was much upset, sir.'

'The devil! Let the portmanteau go at once; attend to all Mrs. Chester's directions—or stop! no, don't send it. I'll walk down there myself.'

'The people in the village are all about, sir, objected le Goui respectfully. 'You see, they had been looking for the rejoicings to-day, and it might be disagreeable for you. Shall I send for Mr. Flint, who will be pleased to carry out your intentions?'

'I am to be a prisoner in my own house, by all accounts. Well, send for Flint—he's a fool,' muttered Keith, turning away to begin shaving operations, 'but he is better than nobody.'

Mr. Flint made his appearance in an incredibly short space of time, having gulped down his breakfast, to the loudly expressed regret of Mrs. Flint, and hurried off, on the receipt of his patron's message.

Keith received him in the blue-room, where he moodily paced up and down, smoking a cigarette.

'Put off the reception at once,' he exclaimed, when Mr. Flint showed his perturbed face at the door. 'Mrs. Chester is not well. I mean,

she is ill—no—gone away to her mother's. Deuce take it, Flint, I haven't been so upset for a long time ! I'd rather by far that anything else had happened.'

'Family differences are always to be deplored,' soothingly said Mr. Flint, who had arrived at a pretty clear idea of the state of the case.

'What do you mean ? I suppose, then, my affairs are already public property.' Keith rested his arms on the chimney-piece and leant his head against them. 'You are a married man, Flint, and you know that women are sometimes queer, though Mrs. Chester was decidedly an angel.'

'An angel!' repeated Mr. Flint, in a tone of conviction.

'The purest and the best of living women.'

'The purest and the best,' echoed Mr. Flint.

'Don't be a fool, Flint. Why, you know very little about her.'

'Only common report,' answered Mr. Flint meekly. 'My wife and she always got on.'

'You must do something for me, Flint. You must stop gossip—it is all a mere

nothing. Mrs. Chester will change her mind presently; but, meanwhile, she has gone to stay with her mother.'

'Exactly,' said Mr. Flint.

'What do you mean by "exactly"? She must come back; do you hear, Flint?—she *must* come back. A married woman's proper place is in her husband's house.'

'Can you compel her?' asked Mr. Flint gravely.

'Compel her?—no. But moral suasion; you understand the kind of thing. As an agent, you must have to deal with all sorts and kinds of character.'

'Not ladies though, I am sorry to say,' Mr. Flint murmured regretfully; 'only with the rougher sex. I am afraid the clergyman works more in that direction.'

'The clergyman—yes, to be sure. Very good, but, of course, I must see her myself. We are devoted to one another, you know.'

Mr. Flint smiled respectfully, and ventured mentally to differ. People who were devotedly attached to each other seldom afforded food for scandal. Then he remembered that Mrs. Flint had called Dorothy 'high and mighty.' *He* did not share his wife's opinion. To his idea the very poise of Dorothy's head was most

graceful and engaging. He should rather have termed her 'a sweet creature.'

'Now mind'—Keith had resumed his old languid tones—'now mind, I won't have any scandal trumped up about me. You may tell what story you please, invent whatever you think best. I suppose tongues *will* wag, but you must not give them matter for the exercise. The ox could be roasted whole, I imagine, all the same, and the dinner given to the tenants. We must throw a sop to Cerberus. "Bis dat qui cito dat." But I dare say you are not a Latin scholar. I mean, it is better to do these little favours quickly when one is about it. You understand, I presume? My affairs are not to be discussed unpleasantly, for I have not the slightest doubt that everything can be promptly and amicably arranged; only just for an instant, you perceive, there *are* difficulties.'

'I quite understand, sir. You may rely upon me.'

'And by-the-bye, Flint, as I don't want a yelling mob at my heels if I put my head out of doors, how can I go quietly down to the Angel House and see my wife?'

Thanks to his plans and precautions, Keith had by this time almost reasoned himself into

the belief that the estrangement with Dorothy was likely to prove a mere evanescent trifle.

‘I will send up a close fly from the Seven Stars for you, and if you lean well back you will not be recognised,’ said Flint, taking his leave.

Keith felt so much better after the agent’s visit—in fact tolerably reassured and hopeful—that he was able to compose himself into a study of the daily papers, and even, during the morning, to stroll round with the gardener and discuss plans for the autumn garden and the transplanting of shrubs. Le Goui’s curiosity, which, though restrained by the bounds of his acquired good manners and decency, was yet considerable, became much exercised to account for Keith’s sudden change of manner, his apparent serenity, and the healthy appetite with which he lunched.

‘Master has had *some* news, but what it is I can’t think,’ he reported to Trimmer, who sat in the steward’s room, in a high state of dudgeon at her summary dismissal; comforting herself, however, by the thought that she could charge a month’s warning, wages and board-wages, so that, if she was only lucky enough to find a new place quickly, she might almost make a good thing out of it.

‘The gentry have no feelings,’ replied the lady’s-maid, helping herself to beef-steak pie—for the servants’ dinner had been delayed owing to the general commotion. ‘I found that out long ago, when I lived with Lady Mandrake. She was a fine masterful lady, and minded nothing except that she had to die. Providence was kind to her there, too; for she died quite sudden-like, with no pain to speak of—of indigestion.’

‘Ah well, Mrs. Trimmer, we’re all mortal, more’s the pity!’ said le Goui, hurrying off with the sherry-decanter, which he considered the appropriate beverage for grief. Champagne was too light and giddy a wine, claret sour and depressing; but sherry answered every purpose, being both genteel and comforting.

When the fly arrived from the Seven Stars, according to orders, Keith stepped in with mixed feelings. It was very disagreeable to have to lean back in the fusty vehicle, with both windows up, in order to escape observation, and to sit still, content to be drawn along at a snail’s pace by the miserable stiff-kneed old horse, who made almost daily journeys between the village and the railway-station. The whole proceeding utterly lacked dignity, and almost approached to shame.

Keith heartily wished to make a good effect at the Angel House, to convey an impression of affability, generosity, and genuine regard for a woman's deplorably fine sensibility, such as might be expected from a large-minded, temperate, and loving husband. He meant plausibly to urge his lawful authority and natural affection, certainly not to plead humbly for forgiveness and restoration as a suppliant.

Faint misgivings as to his own powers of persuasion, and a fear of Dorothy's adherence to what she believed to be right, disturbed him, however, in his clandestine progress beneath the triumphal arches and past the flags and banners hanging from the windows of the houses.

What a pity—what a pity it all was, to be sure, to lose such a unique chance of conciliating public favour, and raising one's self into popular notoriety! Keith's sense of refinement was almost too highly developed to permit of his calling himself a democrat, such men having neither taste nor culture; but the same refinement and exquisite perception of the fitting made him also shrink with horror from the crying injustice in the lot of rich and poor, and the painful anomalies of the social

system. He wished everyone to be very happy in his own way, and was perfectly ready to waive prejudices and old-established customs, provided they were known to be injurious to the people's interests ; at the same time he would not have felt inclined to dirty his own fingers by pulling some poor wretch out of the gutter. He would make a good representative of the people, but it would be in a kind of careless, lavish, and condescending manner, which took no account of the socialistic theory of universal equality.

By this time they had reached the Angel House. The driver scrambled clumsily down from the box, and opened the fly-door, which always stuck, and required to be pushed, pulled, and wheedled into compliance with its duty.

Keith walked up to the house with the most becoming dignity and indifference he was able to command. It was certainly an awkward errand, to fetch home the wife whom one had but recently carried off in triumph from the arms of her weeping relatives. What disagreeable version might she not have given of the affair—for women were proverbially prone to exaggeration—and how might the said relations receive him ? Sarah, as neat and prim

as ever, looking as if she could not conceive what business he had come upon, ushered him into the empty drawing-room. He had asked for his wife, but it was Margaret who presently came down and received him amiably. He experienced some gratitude at this unexpected favour, for he was already beginning to realize that it was going to be a far more unpleasant affair than he had anticipated. There had evidently been no attempt made at company arrangements, the drawing-room blinds were down, the flower-glasses empty, and the books ranged symmetrically in a circle round the table, according to Sarah's inartistic taste. The family must have been too much perturbed by Dorothy's sudden irruption to alter any of their habitual ways for her comfort.

Margaret spoke kindly : ' You asked for Dorothy, but she is lying down with a headache.'

' Doesn't she mean to see me then?' inquired Keith, wondering whether this would be the proper occasion for a display of marital authority.

' I don't think so.' Margaret herself seemed subdued by the gravity of the case, and spoke in a low but distinct whisper.

' Margaret '—Keith took her hand, pressing

it warmly—‘Margaret, this must not go on. I am very unhappy. Do try to make Dorothy listen to reason. Why, even if she thought that things were not quite right, that I was to blame—we all make mistakes, you know—but even so, it is her duty to come back, not to forsake me. Think how dreadful it would be for us to part now—to quarrel—perhaps never to see each other any more! It is almost shocking. Try to make her understand—try to soften her.’

This was quite different from the speech he intended to deliver; he had abstained from saying anything about marital authority, but, on the contrary, had talked of softening Dorothy, and stooped to ask her sister’s intervention. Yet, as Keith stood thus, in the dim light of the unused drawing-room, clasping Margaret’s hand in the fervour of his entreaties, such speech seemed the only possible. It was as if he had beheld the shrouded figure of his own happiness gradually disappearing into the gloomy depths of an untimely tomb.

‘You *will* try, Margaret?’

‘I am afraid I shall not succeed; Dorothy may not listen to me.’

Margaret was honestly grieved for this handsome young man, who came to her in his

trouble, seeming to lean on her for comfort and sympathy. She could not help surmising that, in Dorothy's position, she herself would have behaved very differently. But Dorothy had always been strange and reticent, fond of dull old books, and despising good advice.

'What is your opinion? What does she say?' Keith asked anxiously.

'She says very little indeed, and she refuses to answer any questions—you may be sure I have asked plenty.'

'But she *must* give some reasons for her extraordinary behaviour; women do not generally leave their husbands in that fashion, in such a desperate hurry.'

'I think it is very selfish of Dorothy,' confessed Margaret, who liked to agree with her good-looking brother-in-law, 'and I have told her so. She is just spoiling everyone's enjoyment, for we had all been looking forward to the reception, and Mrs. Parkinson and I had worked like navvies, pricking our fingers with thorns and evergreens, and hanging up wreaths at the risk of our necks—and then to have everything altered and upset for the sake of some foolish fad is very disappointing. When I said this to her, she only answered that there were more important things in life than

pink calico and faded flowers. Pink calico, too! I suppose she would not have had us use red silk, she who used to preach economy generally,' added Margaret, scarcely able to restrain her honest indignation.

'But surely you can offer some advice?' Keith was now meek enough, and ready to snap at any suggestion Margaret's ready wit might offer.

'I really think you had better do nothing just at present. Dorothy is evidently determined to have her own way, and contradiction would only increase her obstinacy : when one can't go through a wall, it is better to go round it.' Margaret, having aired this small axiom of feminine strategy, laughed a little. 'It's almost a pity, Keith, you did not marry *me* instead of Dorothy. I should not have run away, I promise you, whatever you did, but should have stayed in that comfortable house at Blackness, and sat by your fireside, a thorn in your flesh, on purpose to worry you.'

'Yes?' Keith could not manage a smile. 'Then do you mean that I am to go back to my comfortless home with the charming conviction forced upon me that all the village are laughing at my discomfiture?'

The mockery of indifferent neighbours held

a bitterer sting for Keith's sensitive pride than his wife's desertion (much as he felt that), for even in years to come it would be impossible to deny the ridiculous position in which he had once been placed by a woman's caprice.

'I am afraid you must go home alone to-day,' Margaret said, from the depths of the armchair in which she had seated herself. Keith still stood opposite, leaning against the mantel-shelf, with his hands in his pockets. 'But I shouldn't *remain* alone, if I were you; it must be so dreadfully dull, sitting by yourself over your wine, with no one to talk to. Why don't you ask Mr. Palis or Mr. Coote down to stay?' Margaret uttered the last of these names with a slight and becoming blush.

'Johnnie! Dear old fellow! Yes, he *would* be an addition. He never needs to be amused as long as you give him a gun or a fishing-rod to handle. I declare that's a very good idea of yours, Margaret. I will telegraph to him at once. I don't know where he is, though. Perhaps, if he is at home, he may be going to have a party for the 1st of September. However, it still wants a few days to that. Margaret, to think that he was here when I fell in love and proposed to your sister, and now—what a contrast it is!'

‘Perhaps things may all come right yet. Hope on, hope ever,’ said Margaret encouragingly.

‘It is pretty hard, though, to do that when a man has had such a crushing blow. However, you have cheered me a good deal, Margaret, and I am really very much obliged to you.’

Keith did not feel nearly as wretched as he had expected when he sat over his solitary dessert that evening, and leisurely sipped a bottle of fine Leoville claret which le Goui, unasked, had considerately brought up and placed before him, warmed to precisely the right temperature. The telegram, very urgently worded, had been despatched to Coote, and there was every prospect that, being a good-hearted fellow, he would make his appearance the next day. Even if his skill were insufficient to the task of unravelling the tangled skein of matrimonial affairs, yet his cheery face and glib flow of practical talk were exactly the things best calculated to take off Keith’s attention from his own troublesome worries. Coote never seemed to be bothered or in love. What a fortunate fellow he was! Certainly an ardent devotee of field-sports escaped a good deal of heart-burning and annoyance.



CHAPTER IV.

LADY DARLINGTON SYMPATHIZES.

‘**I** HAVE got some news for you, Nina,’ Lord Darlington announced, when, according to his invariable custom on the 1st of September, he returned from cub-hunting preparatory to the day’s partridge-shooting. He walked into his wife’s dressing-room in his splashed blucher-boots and corduroys, with the dew of the forest clinging to his hair and moustache, and the earthy smell of the mighty hunter, which has been handed down since the days of Esau, pervading his person.

He found her engaged in the mysteries of her toilette, assisted by Hetty and Letty, who, as they expressed it, ‘were helping her to dress ;’ the ritual in use being to cling to her

skirts, to run in between the obliging lady's-maid's legs and under her arms, generally causing her to drop whatever she held. If this happened to be a saucer of pins, so much the better for them; for she would then be obliged to go down on her knees and pick them up tediously one by one, a search which delighted the children, and which the maid had at last learnt to bear with equanimity and long-suffering.

‘What is it, dear?’ asked Lady Darlington, holding up her pink face to be kissed by her huge, hardy husband, and then successively lifting Hetty and Letty's pink faces to receive the same affectionate salute.

‘Horsfall told me—he was out hunting this morning—he says business is rather slack, so he means to come out pretty constantly. We got on an old fox, had a rare good gallop—ran into Fairleigh Wood, where we changed foxes, killed a cub, and blooded the hounds, I am happy to say,’ observed Lord Darlington, proceeding to pull off his heavy boots with the aid of the boot-jack Hetty officiously thrust into his hand.

‘Yes, dear, but about the news?’ his wife gently reminded, while the maid deftly pinned up her ladyship's plaits, taking acrobatic leaps

after hair-pins to avoid contact with the active infants.

‘It is about those Chesters; you were always interested in them.’

‘Oh, dear, is it anything bad?’ A sudden paleness swept over the pink cheeks—for Lady Darlington, notwithstanding her acquired bravery about the hunting, always naturally reverted to her old fear of accidents. ‘Mr. Chester is not hurt, is he?—or, perhaps, he is ill again?’

‘Thank you, Hetty; that is a great deal better.’ Lord Darlington luxuriously stretched out his bootless feet in their grey woollen socks, and leant back in his chair. ‘Perhaps you might call it an accident, Nina—but not quite in the usual sense, however—his wife has run away from him!’

‘Buffie, you don’t mean it,’ she said, while Lord Darlington laughed loudly, as the oddity of the affair presented itself to him more forcibly. ‘There, that will do, Osborn, thank you, you can leave the room,’ added the little lady with dignity, suddenly remembering the presence of a servant, before whom such peccadilloes should on no account be familiarly discussed (the children were too young to signify). ‘Now tell me exactly

all about it—what *has* happened? I can't believe *that* dear Dorothy, who was as good as gold, has run away.'

'She has only gone to her mother's; but by Gad, Nina, it *is* a rum start for a young woman, you must allow that. You had better go and lecture her, my dear, in your own wise fashion, on the duties of matrimony.'

'Of *course* I shall go and see her,' said Lady Darlington gravely; 'but I know she would not have taken such a step, except under the strongest provocation. Why, she positively adored that handsome husband of hers, who, between ourselves, I am afraid, is a scamp.'

'Hush, dear; it is always dangerous to say such things about people,' remarked Lord Darlington, smiling.

'Could the marchesa have turned up, do you think? Dorothy was dreadfully jealous of *her*.'

'Fiddle-de-dee, there was not a particle of ground for jealousy there—they only played the piano together, and talked æsthetic nonsense. I always told you no good could come of a musical man—they have all the faults of women, and none of the virtues of men. It stands to reason they must, when they're at home all day, fiddling and reading away their

brains, instead of taking a ride, or a constitutional, or even a tramp with a gun through the turnips.'

'Tell me more — what did you hear?' Lady Darlington, while she talked, unconsciously pressed little Letty, who had laid her curly blond head on her mother's shoulder, more closely to her maternal bosom. 'How dreadful it all seems. Perhaps, though, Mr. Horsfall exaggerated; men are so ill-natured about women!'

'Not a bit of it. Here you goose, Kitty, why you've tumbled down and had a spill.' The child was engaged riding cock-horse on her father's knee, and burst into chuckles of delighted laughter at her accustomed mishap, without which, indeed, the game would not have seemed perfect.

'Every one is talking of it; the people of Dronington were going to give the Chesters a welcome home, but of course this has knocked on the head all the festivities. Mrs. Chester went to her mother's on foot in the early morning, the very day after her arrival, and Chester has moped alone at Blackness ever since. Horsfall called on him, and the Vicar too, but they were not admitted; he will see no one except Flint the agent, who I shouldn't

think would be much comfort; he's a very good agent, but as to consolation, why—' Lord Darlington whistled.

'It is inexplicable,' mused Lady Darlington.

'Well, dear, I thought you would like to know all this. I advise you to have the pony-carriage out, and drive over this afternoon to the Angel House, and there you will hear the latest intelligence. Now, are you nearly ready for breakfast, for I can tell you I have a tremendous appetite after that gallop? By-the-bye, Horsfall was riding a very neat grey mare to-day—he bought her in Ireland. I think I must get him to part with her—she looks a real good sort, as if she could jump, and would turn out a clinker!' thus saying Lord Darlington marched out of the room with one little girl perched triumphantly on his shoulder, and the other hanging round his neck, in close imitation, as she fondly believed, of a sack of coals.

Mr. Horsfall had not only imparted the interesting intelligence of Dorothy's flight to Lord Darlington, but he had told every one he met, and every client who came into his office in the course of the next day or two. His broadly expressed hints and comments—

added to the positive fact of the postponed rejoicings, and of the tenants' dinner taking place under the sole presidency of Mr. Flint, disappointing everybody who had hoped to hear Mr. or Mrs. Chester returning thanks in person—made it plain to the most simple observer that *something* had happened, and that that *something*, coupled with Mrs. Chester's solitary stay in her mother's house, an unexampled occurrence in the early annals of matrimony, implied a serious quarrel between the Squire of Blackness and his wife.

Public opinion veered about considerably : some people assumed that Mr. Chester was possessed of so dreadful a temper that he had even been seen to strike his wife—this assertion, however, seeming to depend only on the testimony of servants, found but little credence ; while other people declared that Dorothy, though a blonde, was anything but gentle, and that her trying disposition had necessitated a request from Mr. Chester, usually only addressed to burglars, to take whatever she pleased, but to retire immediately from the premises. The Vicar, appealed to on the subject by his parishioners, declared he knew nothing whatever about it ; but Mrs. Maynard, at this period, formed a habit of drink-

ing tea with all her acquaintances in turn, on which occasions she would shake her head with a wisdom worthy of Lord Burleigh, and drop her voice with an inflection of deep mystery, driving nervous people into a state of pleasurable tremor. 'That poor Mr. Chester, so good-looking and so rich, it is very hard upon him,' old ladies murmured in the intervals of tea and toast, not a bit disturbed by the thought that they had never exchanged a word or a look with him, and were not likely to, inasmuch as they neither held a vote nor owned the remotest bowing acquaintance with fashionable society.

Mrs. Parkinson, in her warm emphatic tones, roundly asserted that she had known the Strait girls ever since they were children, and that Dorothy was incapable of anything mean : she might have been badly brought up—Mrs. Strait, though a Churchwoman, was rambling in her talk, and far too careless about her daughters ; but she had certainly never inculcated anything but the strictest morality. In reality, no one knew anything positive beyond the bare certainty that Dorothy, on her departure from Blackness, had found a shelter with her mother. Mrs. Maynard became consumed with curiosity and baffled interest,

when day after day she called at the Angel House, and received always the same unsatisfactory ‘Not at home, ma’am,’ to her inquiries.

‘I think it positively rude,’ she confided to one of her cronies, ‘after all my kindness to Dorothy ; and it is so marked, too, for I ask for the whole family one after the other, and still I am told they are all out. Now, is it likely they can be always out, when no one has set eyes on them lately ?—it must be meant for rudeness !’

She was still further confirmed in this opinion when Mr. Maynard received a message from Mrs. Strait, requesting his presence, and he remained closeted for two hours in the widow’s company, while his wife waited outside, stamping up and down impatiently. But the Vicar was reticent to a degree, and all Mrs. Maynard’s ingenuity could extract no welcome revelation from him.

‘But Charles, why did they send for you ? You may just tell me *that*,’ coaxed Mrs. Maynard ; ‘what did Dorothy say ?’

‘I did not see her.’

‘Not see her ! Why, I thought you went to give her good advice. What in the world was the object of your visit, then ?’

‘Mrs. Strait wanted a talk.’

‘Well, I’m sure it is rather late in the day for a talk, when a married woman has done such a daring deed as to leave the kind husband who has given her everything. I declare I have lost patience with Dorothy. If you remember, I always prophesied no good would come of that marriage.’

‘You certainly did; but I imagined you had doubts of Mr. Chester’s fitness.’

‘That is just like you, Charles, always bringing up one’s words by the wrong end. I said the marriage would be an unhappy one, and it *is* unhappy; now, was I right or wrong? It is early days, though. But May weddings are always wretched. I suppose you would say that had something to do with the Virgin Mary, who does not like people to marry?’

‘Sophie!’ Mr. Maynard looked up reprovingly from the pages of his clerical magazine.

But, nothing daunted, Sophie returned again to the charge: ‘What does Dorothy mean to do, and how long are her best friends to be kept from seeing her?’

‘I think that while she is in such trouble and mental distress, she shrinks from

seeing anyone ; and, for my part, when there exist melancholy misunderstandings, I approve of discreet silence.'

'Oh! then she *is* in distress of mind, and there *are* misunderstandings?' said Sophie, glad of the smallest crumb upon which to feed her love of gossip. 'Will there be a scandal—I mean more than there has been already, and shall we have a divorce?'

'I hope not indeed,' answered the Vicar, much distressed by Sophie's flippancy. 'I think Mrs. Chester is too good to purchase a few years of worldly happiness at the price of another's shame.'

'But if it is the law, Charles? I can't see why one should not avail one's self of any law made by the Queen and the Parliament ; there can be no sin in it,' said Sophie, as she rejoiced to think of the spicy seasoning whispers of a probable divorce would lend to her talk at future tea-parties.

'“Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder,”' softly murmured the Vicar, turning over the leaves of his review.

'That's all very well, but the Lord Chancellor himself puts them asunder—or whoever the bewigged dignitary may be who administers

the law ; and *you*, Charles, have nothing to say to it.'

After all this, it was a considerable shock to Mrs. Maynard to hear that Lady Darlington's pony-carriage had been seen driving through the village, and stopping at the door of the Angel House, where, after some little parleying, her ladyship had descended, sending away the carriage for an hour to the Seven Stars, at the expiration of which time she had again entered the vehicle and driven rapidly off, without pausing to call at the Vicarage or anywhere else. Mrs. Maynard had once dined and slept at Lovemere Hall, and of the delights of this visit she had a lively recollection. It was the first time in her life she had eaten off silver plates and experienced the unwonted consciousness that a powdered flunkey was stationed motionless behind her. It grieved her sorely to think that the acquaintance had not since progressed, for she would have much enjoyed talking about 'My friend, Lady Darlington,' or 'What we do at the Darlingtons.' Of course, at Dronington, where every single soul knew what his neighbours did, it was perfectly patent that Mrs. Maynard's first peep into high aristocratic circles had been her last. Naturally, too,

this conviction lent a sub-acid flavour to her remarks.

‘How vulgar—how stuck-up of Dorothy to be sure—how clear it is that she must be completely spoilt, and have her head turned by the fine marriage she made!’ ejaculated Sophie; ‘when she receives a titled lady and refuses admittance to her old and tried friends. I am sure *I* shall not take the trouble to stand up for her any more. I dare say she fully deserves any unhappiness Mr. Chester may have caused her—if that is so. But we have not heard both sides of the case yet. What good can there be in people who despise the society in which they have been brought up? Dorothy is, after all, only middle-class, decidedly middle-class; and no talk of lords and ladies can ever alter *that*.’

Thus Mrs. Maynard, in her righteous indignation against the assumption of unbecoming airs; though it would have seemed to her the most natural thing in the world had she been admitted to Lady Darlington’s intimacy, even though the privilege should have excluded her from the society of old and tried friends. Providence was very unjust in its dispensations, she reflected. What natural affinity was there between good looks, fine

eyes, and the post of nursery governess or drudging wife to a parson, the only things her superior advantages had sufficed to procure for her? Everyone could see that she was fitted for a higher sphere, the wife of a dean or a canon perhaps — they held receptions and saw fine company. But then Charles was so unworldly and so simple-minded. There was not much chance of his being made a bishop or even a dean, though if preferment had been granted to the merits of a wife, Sophie would undoubtedly have deserved it, in her opinion.





CHAPTER V.

KEITH TRIES HIS HAND AT CONSOLATION.

WHEN Sarah informed Dorothy that Lady Darlington was below, and wished to speak to her, Dorothy's first impulse was to refuse.

'She seemed very particular set on seeing you, ma'am,' said Sarah, reluctant to deliver an unwelcome message to so fine and pleasant-spoken a lady.

'I don't wish to see anyone. I have already told you so.'

'Very well, ma'am, only her ladyship will be sore put out, I reckon.'

'Do as I tell you,' answered Dorothy, thinking to put a stop to the discussion.

Sarah then unwillingly departed, for it seemed to her an incredible piece of folly on the part of Dorothy to deny herself to a real lady, who had driven many miles in her pony-

carriage along a muddy road (it had rained heavily in the night) on purpose to speak with her. However, she soon returned, announcing that Lady Darlington would take no denial, and desired leave to come up into Mrs. Chester's bedroom, if she were not feeling well.

'Then I suppose it must be,' said Dorothy resignedly. 'Show her ladyship into the drawing-room, and say I will be with her immediately.'

Mrs. Chester glanced in the mirror, noticed that, though pale and sad-looking, she was neatly and fastidiously equipped as usual, and descended to the drawing-room. Lady Darlington stood, as she had done on the occasion of her last visit, in the middle of the empty space, looking about her. She was dressed in a thin tight-fitting serge gown, ornamented with red braid.

'Dear Dorothy!' she exclaimed when the door opened, receiving her friend with outstretched arms and one of her own impulsive kisses; 'I knew you could never have the heart to turn me away from your door!'

'I have seen *no one*,' said Dorothy quietly, when they were seated.

'No; but you will do so now. You cannot be allowed to mope like this; solitude

never cured sorrow yet. But tell me—have you quarrelled with your husband, and what is all this I hear? What reason had you to run away? though, indeed, to my mind, nothing *can* justify a woman in leaving her husband—unless, perhaps,’ she added meditatively, ‘he beat her. I don’t think I could stand bruises and black eyes. But probably Mr. Chester has been ill-advised. Would you like me to speak to him? I am quite sure that he would not lift a finger against you, he looks far too gentle.’

‘I never said my husband was in fault; I don’t accuse him, remember; I don’t blame him; he has always been kind to me.’ Dorothy’s voice was steady, but the rosy colour flew to her cheek, and something in her throat seemed to rise and choke her. ‘But there are many other reasons. We are not suited. Perhaps I was jealous and exacting. I did not understand——’

‘No, dear, naturally. You were so very young. But you do quite right not to abuse him, as some women in your position would do,’ said Lady Darlington, fondly patting Dorothy’s hand; ‘because, of course, when you make it up again, as you will do some day, it might be disagreeable to remember the

spiteful things you had allowed yourself to say.'

'I shall never make it up,' said Dorothy, more steadily; 'but no one must say a word against Keith in my hearing.'

'What does she mean?' thought Lady Darlington to herself, much puzzled. She could understand a good lover, or a good hater, but not a mollusc-like kind of indifference which forbade evil-speaking, and yet would not decide to kiss and make friends. 'At any rate you must come and pay us a visit,' was the audible conclusion of her meditations, cheerfully delivered; 'that is the object which brought me over here to-day. Darlington and I both hope to see you—will you drive back with me now, or shall I send the carriage for you to-morrow?'

'Neither, thank you. How good you are to me, dear Lady Darlington! Please don't think I am ungrateful, but indeed I intend to lead quite a different sort of life now, something very quiet and humdrum, so that visits to fine luxuriant houses would not be at all compatible with such a life, and might make me feel discontented. I must no longer look upon myself as the wife of a rich squire, who needs only to express a wish and it is immediately

gratified, but just as a poor woman who has to earn her bread.'

'Nonsense! in the first place, you must not call me Lady Darlington—I mean to be Nina to you always, whatever happens, even should you be in the workhouse. In the second place, if you choose to earn your own bread (which, though it sounds a fine romantic notion, I don't believe you will), you can't dispense with friends, and I am your very best friend.'

Herewith Lady Darlington kissed Dorothy's pale soft cheek, and looked expectantly for her answer.

'Don't tempt me, Nina. I should like the plan immensely, you know; at least I should like to be with *you*, but how can I? Look——' she drew from her pocket, as she spoke, the draft of an advertisement to be inserted in the *Slowchester Beacon*, stating that a young lady well grounded in all the branches of an English education would be glad to give daily lessons to young pupils; 'and besides this, I *must* pass the Cambridge examination now, and for that I shall have to study hard. All these months of idleness and holiday-making have, I fear, unfitted me for wholesome work.'

'Your husband cannot leave you to *starve*—teaching is no better than starvation,' said her

friend impatiently. 'It would be an unheard-of thing on his part—in fact, impossible. Darlington must speak to him.'

'Keith is certain to offer me money,' answered Dorothy sadly, 'but, my dear, no woman can take any money from the man she is leaving; it would seem as if he had compensated her. No! I will not touch a farthing of his.'

'Fiddlesticks! it is your duty. You are a great deal too high-strung—besides, one must live. At any rate, this decides me to insist on your coming to Lovemere; and once there, we will talk over everything.'

'Please do not ask me.'

'Why, what a perverse strange little thing it is! I really don't know how to take you,' said Nina, who was accustomed to get her own way easily, putting on a pretty pout.

'Well, then, you agree with me. I am not fit for company at present. You had far better leave me to myself. I give you my promise that I will come and see you some day, when all my plans are settled, and I am sure of myself.'

'Are you not sure of yourself now?' asked Lady Darlington.

For all answer Dorothy put her arms round

the kind little lady's neck, and hid her face on her shoulder, while big tears rolled slowly from her eyes.

‘Poor dear, poor dear! there—don’t cry so! I love you very much, Dorothy.’

Lady Darlington stroked her hair with placid affection, much as she would have done to one of her own little girls in the event of her having tumbled down and injured her head or her hand.

‘And now,’ said Dorothy presently, lifting her face and wiping away her tears, ‘now I feel much better. I hate myself for being so weak—it is so silly to break down, but your words upset me. Is not marriage a hard nut to crack? it seems as if one could never understand.’

‘Love is the only key to its puzzles,’ murmured Lady Darlington softly.

‘Yet even love does not always seem to lead one right.’

‘In the end it will, I am sure,’ said Lady Darlington, with conviction.

‘Do you think perfect happiness is ever attainable for human beings here on earth?’ said Dorothy, looking wistfully out of her large eyes.

‘Oh dear, yes!’ cried Lady Darlington

quickly, remembering Lord Darlington and the children, and her own peaceful home.

‘I used to think once,’ continued Dorothy, in a dreamy way, ‘that just to have something to love in the world was all that any one could want. Sometimes I fancied it need not even be beautiful or grand or clever, but just an embodied dream of one’s heart, to which in full sympathy it could go out. I remember loving a little ugly dog like that once, till it was shot by a gamekeeper for poaching—but now it seems to me as if to love were not enough, as if there must be some answering worth to call out affection.’

‘Of course one can’t love without an object; but when one has a husband it is all right. How I wish, Dorothy, I could make you see things with my eyes!’

‘So do I; but nobody ever could. I don’t believe I know anything about the matter, nor that I shall ever learn to love rightly.’

‘One can always do one’s duty, I am sure it is very simple; but you read too much. I don’t believe in books; they only muddle one’s brain and hurt one’s eyes. I never could read by candlelight.’

‘Am I muddled?’ asked Dorothy, with a smile.

‘I’m not sure you haven’t a bee in your bonnet,’ said Lady Darlington, gravely contemplating her friend’s sweet face; ‘but just now you look tired and ill. Will you really not come with me? Then I am afraid I must go. You *will* write and propose yourself—*do*. You must not disappoint us. Darlington is as keen for your visit as I am.’

‘Yes,’ thought Dorothy, when Lady Darlington had driven off, ‘perhaps I do muddle my brain. I feel wrong all round now; very likely I have sat too long in the house.’

This was true, for she had not set foot out of doors since her arrival, a week ago. Just then the dinner-bell rang, and put a stop to her meditations; for Dorothy tried, in all such small ways as early rising and punctuality at meals, to compensate her mother for the burden of her presence. The early dinner over, Dorothy ran back to her room, watched Margaret go out on a shopping expedition, and Mrs. Strait retire for her afternoon nap; and then, choosing her time, she succeeded in leaving the house unobserved, except by little Snow, who quickly ran after her, wagging his tail. Motioning him home, she turned out of the high-road and took the path across

the fields, where it was most unlikely she would meet anyone.

September had now arrived, with its autumnal freshness and crisp invigorating air. Clematis and hanging bunches of ripe blackberries garlanded the hedgerows overshadowed by the elder-tree, and the bare stubble fields were rendered lively by the whirr of partridge-wings. Dorothy stepped lightly along. Tedious confinement to the house, added to other causes, had depressed her spirits, which regained their buoyancy as she inhaled the fresh air and raised her head to the clear sky, across which light clouds floated daintily.

The path led along a slope, and was slightly raised. On one side stretched the expanse of stubble, on the other a deep ditch bordered by the honeysuckle-scented hedge-row ; beyond were more fields, clumps of trees, and in the distance tiny threads of blue smoke rising from cottages in the valley. The silent cheerfulness of nature had already shed some of its soothing influence over her, when she perceived a man's lithe figure vault the stile in front, and rapidly approach. The truth flashed instantly upon her perception. It was Keith ! And here was she

alone, hemmed in on one side by the deep ditch and prickly tangled hedge, and on the other by the stubble-fields, where, even if she forced herself to run quickly, she could not escape notice. Keith had recognised her, too, and hurried his steps.

‘Dorothy, what good fortune to meet thus; now at last I can have an opportunity of speaking to you! These misunderstandings *must* cease. Listen to me.’ He had by this time joined her, turned, and strode slowly by her side; she, faint and trembling, feeling his presence benumb her. Her swift glance comprehended that he looked haggard and ill, and that his toilette showed a lack of scrupulous care. ‘Dorothy’—by a rapid movement she thwarted his attempt to take her hand, and withdrew herself beyond his reach—‘why are you so hard upon me, why treat me as if I were a criminal?’

‘Are you not guilty then?’ She turned upon him her sweet moist eyes, full of eager questioning.

‘In a fashion, of course I am to blame, according to the strictest purist notions; yes, but the world is not governed by *them*. Men’s passions are strong, and severity of judgment is not nice in *you*, Dorothy.’

‘I do not judge, I only deplore. I cannot help my feelings.’

‘I also have suffered deeply, and I cannot forget you, darling.’

‘Have I not suffered?’ Dorothy indeed quivered in every limb ; the loved tones, thrilling through her, set the gaping wound aching again acutely.

‘Then if we both suffer—and now I look at at you, you are pale, dear—why all this studied obduracy ? What is your object ? You should not be so severe on youthful follies.’

‘Youthful follies!’ repeated Dorothy bitterly ; ‘I think they are more than that.’

‘Even if I have erred—I never said I was good—are you not content with the disgrace and the scandal you have brought upon me ? Everyone in the neighbourhood freely discusses our affairs ; we are the talk of each muzzy yokel swilling beer in the alehouse—it is intolerable ! Come home now, and let us try to live more happily together in the future.’

‘Impossible!’ Dorothy pressed her fingers together as people do to avoid crying out in physical pain. ‘I could not help you, and it would do no good. I could not behave to you as I ought—your riches would suffocate me.’

‘And yet you say—at least you said—you loved me!’ He laughed grimly. Dorothy kept silence. Heaven alone knew how much she loved Keith even now, and how her heart contracted occasionally with sharp spasms of agony. ‘This is romantic folly,’ he burst out harshly; ‘do you know that I can *compel* you? You are my wife—you owe me obedience in the eye of the law. I have a right to force you to do so, and by God I will!’

‘In the eyes of the law, yes,’ she answered quietly; ‘you may have the right, but for all that you cannot compel me.’

‘Why do you irritate me and make me forget myself? I beg of you to be reasonable, Dorothy,’ Keith said, feeling ashamed of the brutal passion of this outburst; ‘you exasperate me, and I say things I ought not. You cannot tell how much I love you: I was not aware of it myself till quite recently.’ Dorothy still kept silence; with the umbrella in her hand she was pushing away little leaves from her path. ‘Dorothy, if you persist in your conduct you will ruin my life.’

‘Only your own sin can do that. *Why* should you sin—why not give up the money?’

‘Give up!’ the tongue clove to his mouth, his dark gleaming eyes expressed the pro-

foundest astonishment. 'Do you ask this—give up my money—be a poor man again?'

'Yes; poverty is not disgraceful.'

'You are a fool, Dorothy—I mean these are idle heroics. Of course I cannot act in so impulsive and ridiculous a fashion; besides, no one (certainly not the individual you allude to) would make half as good a use of this fortune as I shall. I can perceive some-one has been trying to mislead you, but then you are an impressionable woman. Submit your judgment to mine on matters of business, and rest content in your own proper sphere, little darling of my heart!'

How trying for Dorothy were these harrowing entreaties, and how still more terrible to hear the sophistry with which Keith palliated his unrepentant self-indulgence! As for the crime itself, she could not prevail upon her lips to speak of it in faintest whispers, but far down in the depths of her consciousness it lay, a hideous bloody phantom. If she went back to enjoy riches which were the wages of sin, she would by her participation degrade him, and ruin his soul for ever, just for the sake of her own poor love, which could not deny itself with magnanimity. Again she wrestled inwardly, and this time the victory

grew more complete. They walked on in silence, by tacit consent turning at the stile, and facing in the direction of the Angel House.

‘What is to become of you, Dorothy?’ he began again more gently; ‘have you ever thought of that? A man may battle through the storms of life, but a woman must be wrecked; she needs guidance and shelter.’

‘There is God for us all.’

‘Yes, to be sure, God—Providence—what you please; but He lets men and women starve, and does not hinder the wretches who jump off bridges to end their silly lives. Providence shows no particular care for *them*.’

‘I cannot tell; but I am very sure of one thing, we must not do evil that good may come.’

‘Who wants to do evil? Why, ever since I have known you, I have longed for nothing but the most innocent happiness. Come home with me, Dorothy; once there, I give you permission to lecture me as much as you will.’

‘Oh, Keith!’—it was the first time to-day she had used his name, and he seized upon it as a good omen—‘you torture me! We should only drag one another down. I know it would be so; for the sake of our love we must remain apart.’

‘Then you are perfectly indifferent what

becomes of me?' Keith strove after a jaunty manner. 'If you won't give me happiness, I shall have to get pleasure. How will *you* like that? I don't think it will raise the tone of my mind much.'

'I am not indifferent; it is for your sake. Oh, why can you not understand?'

'It would take omniscience to understand what you are driving at with your cursed fine feelings!'

'Keith!'

'I beg your pardon, Dorothy, for the expression, but it is true—you are making me desperate.'

'Dear Keith,' she pleaded gently and kindly, 'have a little patience. We are both suffering now, I know; but surely time will blunt the edge of our misery. It will be less hard after a while.'

'You are cold and heartless. You talk of principle and duty, and you calmly break the most sacred ties. You refuse me the happiness I have a right to demand, and wish to drive me out alone into all the temptations that lie in wait for a man. You speak of suffering, but you have not an idea of the hell of misery you are creating for me. If you *had*, you would pity me.'

‘I pity you from the bottom of my heart,’ she said, with a new and reverent sympathy in her voice; ‘but pity can alter nothing. Retribution will fall on us both—it has come already.’

‘Very well!’ the pallor of his countenance grew deadly, and his eyes dilated with sudden fury. ‘Very well, the fault may lie on your conscience. I will stay and be preached to no longer. Good-bye.’

He sprang from her side, leapt the stile, and disappeared from view. Dorothy stood still, petrified with surprise and alarm. She had been utterly mad and foolish to expose herself to a meeting with him. It was evident that they must not see each other again, till the soreness of their feelings had diminished, and the strain of passion was relaxed; but as long as they lived in such close proximity, clashings were unavoidable. Another such interview would rob her of what little calmness and strength she possessed. Then to her great relief she remembered Lady Darlington’s pressing invitation, and decided to accept it without delay. On reaching home she therefore sat down and wrote her a letter, begging that, if not inconvenient, the carriage might be sent for her on the following afternoon.



CHAPTER VI.

THE DARLINGTONS AT HOME.

DOVEMERE HALL was a square red-brick house, faced with white stone. Two wings containing offices and stables branched outwards from the main building, and enclosed the courtyard, making three sides of a square. The carriage drive, winding up a steepish approach, terminated at the foot of a handsome forked flight of steps, bordered by an elaborate iron balustrade, resembling the famous horse-shoe staircase of the palace of Fontainebleau. The windows at the other side of the house, which were those of the chief reception-rooms, looked out upon a gravelled terrace and an old-fashioned garden, set in a stiff pattern of box edging, and surmounted by a stone sundial

bearing the motto ‘*Horas non numero, nisi serenas.*’ An exceedingly appropriate inscription in a happy family circle. Beyond the garden, divided by a *haha*, lay the park, a wild expanse of broken ground, covered with bracken, and intersected by fine old trees. Deer browsed among the fern, reposed under the shade of the old chestnuts and limes, or grouped themselves into lively moving patches in the sunshiny clefts of the dingle. The house was very old, and the painted frescoed ceiling of the central hall was very old, and the antique draperies of silk and worsted, and silver and gold embroidery of the massive bed-furniture were very old ; but this antiquity was the pride of honest Lord Darlington’s life, and the joy of his heart. People wondered at the strange old customs of the place : the children and poor people courtesying to my lord and my lady even from the recesses of church pews, the solemnity of the dinner ceremonial, or the escort of the stockinged footman, carrying the prayer-books to divine service, respectfully behind the company. They wondered still more (remembering their own clumsy servants’ fists, and the chronic necessity under which they laboured of leaving a good mistress, for the sake of a little change, once at least in a

twelvemonth) to find year after year the same quiet-faced housemaid with sleek-braided hair and spotless print gown ; in their bedrooms the same china ornaments and blotting-set, looking apparently as new as ever, and the chairs and tables in their old familiar places, as if mathematical calculations had been used to verify their latitude and longitude. These institutions had existed from time immemorial at Lovemere, and not even the advent of a young and pretty bride had sufficed to change them.

Lord Darlington was as tenacious of Conservative prejudices as any fervent Roman Catholic of the honour due to his especial saint. Occasionally an old chintz was replaced by a new one, or a pair of curtains by one of a more modern pattern ; but these changes were very gradual, few and far between, and only consummated after grave thought and deliberation. The traditions of orange jelly, *pot-pourri*, spiced ale, and damson cheese, for which the housekeeper kept special recipes, were religiously handed down without alteration from one generation of servants to the other. Needless to add that the retainers, of whom there was a goodly company at Lovemere, grew fat, and early in life lost

their hair and acquired a respectable obesity ; nor that they eventually, after some years' faithful service, in which they had attended to their own and their master's interests, set up housekeeping and babies in a nest of comfortable little cottages, which formed a kind of outlying colony on the estate. There was a finer staff of powdered menials in Lord Darlington's establishment than in any of the other county mansions, a greater variety of silver dishes, massive plate, and cumbersome magnificence ; but then he himself was so genial, and his wife so pleasant, that the formality thus engendered never proved burdensome.

At the present moment a family party was collected at Lovemere, consisting of Lord Darlington's sister and her husband, Major and Mrs. Hartshorne ; of Lady Darlington's aunt, Miss Judy Mytten ; and of her brother, the Hon. Hugo Limber. Lord Darlington's sister was older than himself ; she had once been pretty, but was now only ordinary, her face being of that conventional type which, when the freshness of youth has departed, presents no individuality or attractiveness whatever, and renders it difficult to specify the colour of a person's hair or eyes. At the time of her

marriage she had innocently believed it to be a love-match, but subsequently love evaporated, leaving only heart-burnings in its place. The couple were not rich, overburdened with children, Mrs. Hartshorne delicate, and the Major cantankerous. But no disadvantages wearied Lord Darlington's patience and sense of family ties. Major and Mrs. Hartshorne regularly paid visits of considerable duration to his house, and as regularly were received with unvarying cordiality.

The Major, on his retirement from the army, had carried his military notions of order and discipline into the bosom of his family. Mrs. Hartshorne consequently suffered under what might be termed a mild domestic despotism. His natural temper, which was choleric, became atrabilious and peppery under the infliction of stupid cooks, who dropped the fat into the fire and under-roasted the mutton, butlers' ill-kept books and unaccounted-for bottles of wine, and stablemen's delinquencies in the matter of leathers and brushes—for he prided himself on taking the keenest interest in these subjects. Occasionally Mrs. Hartshorne, weary of the subject, ventured to suggest that she would have no aversion to undertaking the trouble-

some duty herself; but the Major interrupted her with an angry ‘Nonsense, my dear! women always make a mess of everything, and I *must* know best, having managed the canteen for fifteen years!’ Indeed, except in their own peculiar province of child-bearing and infant-rearing, about which the Major was perfectly ready to offer valuable suggestions, he believed women to be good for nothing. The good purpose Mrs. Hartshorne apparently served now was that of patient *souffre-douleur* for her husband’s fads and fancies, bred of an enlarged liver and want of contradiction.

Lady Darlington’s aunt, Miss Judy Mytten, was prim and precise, and had not a pound of spare flesh on her bones. She had sandy hair, almost invisible eyelashes and eyebrows, and was as indefinitely colourless as the most respectable and transparent family ghost, especially when arrayed in the skimpy garments of washed-out chintz and pale lavender she preferred. She was also a teetotaler, and entertained a partiality for schoolboys, whom she delighted to invite to her cottage and regale with lemonade and cheese-cakes, a magic-lantern, and a trickle of little songs, whose burden ran thus :

‘Sparkle, sparkle, little spring;
Sparkle on for me.’

Precocious Etonians profited by her hospitality, pocketed the half-crown with which she sent them home, and expended it next day in the purchase of brandy-balls and a sporting newspaper.

The Hon. Hugo Limber was a handsome six-foot 'barbarian,' who prided himself on never looking into a book, and was as easy-tempered as his sister. By the superhuman efforts of a renowned crammer, he had been pushed neck and crop into the army, where in subsequent campaigns he had distinguished himself by a certain brute-courage which extorted admiration from the generals and respect from his comrades ; but at home he was indolent and silent, and could only be roused into energy by a good hunting run or a sparring match. Into this party Dorothy, feeling very shy and strange, was suddenly thrust. Her arrival had been announced by Lady Darlington to the company at breakfast, by whom the news was variously received.

'Left her husband, did she ?' ejaculated Major Hartshorne. 'God bless my soul, what are the women coming to, with their ideas of emancipation !'

‘She is very pretty,’ said Lady Darlington to her brother.

‘She is quite safe from my attentions, then; don’t put her next me at dinner, Nina—there’s a dear—for you know I can’t bear strange women.’

‘Poor thing, I dare say a little kind and serious talk would be the best thing to improve her,’ piped Miss Mytten, running over in her mind the temperance tract most suited to her requirements.

‘All I ask,’ said the hostess again, in her quick bright manner, ‘is, that you will all do your best to be kind to her and enable her to feel at home, as she is my particular friend.’

Dorothy arrived about tea-time, looking very neat and pretty, in a black gown and quiet bonnet. She was received by Lady Darlington and Miss Mytten, the rest of the guests being variously employed, some in ridding themselves of their wet boots after shooting, others—to wit the Hartshorne couple—refreshing themselves by a quarrel, found highly tonic and appetite-giving, when administered just before the evening meal.

Lady Darlington kissed her friend tenderly, and Miss Mytten’s heart warmed to the pale, quiet girl. Here, certainly, was no wine-bibber,

such as her soul abhorred, but rather one who, having met with early disappointment, might prove a shining light to the society of total abstainers.

Dorothy, somewhat tired after her long drive, and oppressed with the scrutinizing glances of numerous servants, the grandest of whom had escorted her through the various halls, passages, and reception-rooms into the presence of her hostess, would gladly have forthwith retired to her room without further ceremony; but this idea was nipped in the bud by the sound of a knock at the door, and the apparition of a nurse, who promptly pushed in first Baby John, curly-headed, blue-eyed and tottery, dressed in a short white frock and shorter sleeves, tied up with scarlet ribbons, which exposed the fair white flesh of his fat-cushioned neck and shoulders; then, in rotation, Letty, in a white frock and blue ribbons, finally Hetty, bringing up the rear by reason of seniority. Baby John gave a kind of chuckle, darted rashly forward, forgot his limited powers of locomotion, toppled over and fell flat at his mother's feet, who, picking him up and pressing him in her arms, exclaimed, 'Isn't he a clever little fellow, and doesn't he walk well, Dorothy?'

‘Does he never hurt himself when he falls?’ asked Mrs. Chester, who was a novice with babies.

‘Never! he is much too clever for that—aren’t you, my ducky darling?’ said the fond mother.

Letty and Hetty, piqued at being neglected when a pleasing shower of caresses was going forward, now snatched at their mother’s gown, and struggled to take her hands, crying out :

‘Aren’t we darlings too, mamma? We want to be darlings.’

‘So you are, dears—so you are!’ said Lady Darlington, putting down Baby John, who stood with legs apart and a decidedly doubtful equilibrium, on the hearthrug, sucking his thumbs.

Having now leisure to notice Dorothy, and remembering that perhaps she might not care so much for these maternal displays, Lady Darlington offered her tea out of fine old Worcester cups, and poured out thick yellow cream from a massive Queen Anne cream-jug.

Dorothy accepted the tea gratefully, but drew down upon herself a mild little sermon from Miss Mytten on the superior merits of tea *versus* wine.

Tea over, and a romp with the children

satisfactorily accomplished, in the course of which they pulled down their mother's hair, scratched their fingers with her brooch, and threw over a vase with flowers, they were regretfully despatched to bed, and Lady Darlington now proceeded to accompany Dorothy to her bedroom, a pleasant apartment in which everything was the perfection of order. Here she again kissed her friend, saying :

‘By-the-bye, dear, what made you change your mind so suddenly about coming to us? Only yesterday you told me that nothing should induce you to leave home.’

‘That is true, and you must think me very capricious ; but I shall run the risk of that, however. The fact is, I have since discovered that there is sometimes courage and prudence in flight.’

‘What! did he pursue you? Then he must really love you!’

‘I met him by accident: we had a very painful interview; and I thought it best to place an impassable barrier between us. He will not seek me out here, if you do not disapprove of my intruding on your hospitality.’

‘You are quite right, and very welcome. But now, dear, whatever you do, don't be late for dinner. Darlington can't bear that. Two

bells ring, you know—one for dressing and the other for dinner. Shall I send my maid to help you? No? Well, as you please. I am so *very* glad to have you!’

When the voluble little lady had departed, Dorothy felt more solitary and depressed in the surroundings of her smart room than she had ever done in her small chamber at the Angel House. The falseness of her position revealed itself to her so clearly. What business had she, the plainly reared daughter of a poor widow, to whom grandeur was no necessity, to marry among fine folk? They could not understand her ways, nor she theirs; and the simple rule of right and wrong, which had served her honestly at home, under altered circumstances was become strange and distorted; like objects viewed through the wrong end of a kaleidoscope. Must the punishment of an egregious blunder, committed in early youth, be eternal—must solitude, despair, and regret be her companions for the remainder of her life? The horrible secrecy imposed upon her by her position haunted and tormented her till she almost believed herself the slave of Fate—destined perpetually to be swept and swayed before the blast of a ruthless and despotic will. Morality pointed

sternly in one direction, affection impulsively urged her in another, while religion mysteriously kept silence. Perhaps she had been mistaken; perhaps the more natural and more womanly plan would have been to indulge the promptings of love to the uttermost—to stay with Keith, to comfort him with her presence, to let herself be adored, to share the consequences of his guilt, to palliate his sin, and guide his faltering steps towards heaven. He declared that innocent happiness was all he desired; innocent happiness she could give him in the future, and surely the past was not her immediate concern. Not? Wherein consisted innocent happiness while the blood of the victim cried out to Heaven? Yet she could understand that even sin might possess a delicious delirium—a swift and exquisite rapture, for which expiation were scarcely too high and terrible a price to pay.

For it was certain that her soul was fainting within her, and her courage failing even now. To be misunderstood and unfairly blamed by everyone for the remainder of her days, was the hard lot she meant to choose; had she sufficient strength to undergo so cruel a martyrdom? Why not choose happiness? One look, one kiss—and she

could be again fondly clasped in Keith's arms and taste the bliss of love; but she must not call things by a wrong name. This was *not* innocent happiness, and the sting of the matter lay in her knowledge of evil. The angel with the flaming sword stood ready to banish her from her garden of Eden—from her fool's paradise.

The dressing-bell broke the thread of her thoughts, and, jumping up with a shudder, she shook off the uncanny whisperings of the subtle temptation. Lord Darlington took her in to dinner; and whatever hesitation Captain Limber may have felt with regard to her, was dispelled when she took her seat beside him, in her nun-like black dress with the white tucker. Before the end of dinner they conversed as old friends; and Lady Darlington had thrown at her brother sundry encouraging nods. Fortunately for Dorothy the evening was short. Lord Darlington, sleepy after his long day in the open air and heavy trudge through the turnips, swept the party off to bed at an early hour. Previously, however, Lady Darlington sang a ballad, in a feeble voice, at which the Major pished and pshawed, and wondered what people could see in such mawkish stuff, and why they could

not content themselves with real sterling tunes, like, for instance, the 'Roast Beef of Old England,' or the 'Old English Gentleman;' he hummed to himself:

'His gun it was old-fashioned,
A regular flint and steel,
Wide muzzled and a killer,
It was heavy in the heel.'

A rubber of whist followed, for sixpenny points, in which Dorothy had the Major for a partner, and bore the brunt of his sallies and commands with remarkable patience. It is not perhaps quite so complimentary to the Major to add that after all these varied emotions she laid her head on her cool white pillow with a profound sense of rest and thankfulness, hailing silence and solitude as her best friends.





CHAPTER VII.

THE NEW GOVERNESS.

‘**S**HE is really not a bad little creature,’ said Mrs. Hartshorne, on the morrow, referring to Dorothy, a confab being held over the library fire respecting the absent guest, in the fashion customary to country house visiting, where each person’s peculiarities or faults form the staple of talk for the remainder of the company.

‘A deuced fine woman, my dear, though she dresses like a sister of charity,’ amplified the Major, benignly warming his hands under his coat-tails, for the day was frosty and somewhat chill. ‘She is a sensible creature enough—did not revoke once at whist, and took my corrections very properly and gratefully, as a well-behaved and modest young woman should. No woman can play whist,

but at least she can attend when she is taught. I could never teach *you*, Clara.'

Clara wisely kept silence; she hated whist, and took pains *not* to learn, thereby confirming the Major in his low opinion of woman's capacity for the game.

'Why, you talk as if she were a poor governess, instead of the wife of a very rich man,' said Lady Darlington, with a merry laugh.

'I suppose he will never consent to take her back again—at least I presume not—but most men have no dignity,' remarked the Major pompously.

'It's far more likely that she will never consent to return to *him*.'

'By Gad! who ever heard of such a thing? What are the women coming to—leaving their lawful husbands, and gallivanting about as if the world belonged to them!'

'If the husbands behave badly, what else would you have them do?'

Mrs. Hartshorne sniggered under her breath at this question, put innocently enough by Lady Darlington.

The Major privately thought there was a great deal to be done, and that in such a case the old custom of corporal punishment might not inconveniently be introduced; for he re-

spected the well-known adage—‘A spaniel, a wife, and a walnut tree; the more you beat them, the better they be.’ He believed in the value of most time-honoured institutions, the verbal inspiration of the Bible, and the value of the Apostolic injunction, ‘Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord.’

Lady Darlington laughed outwardly at his solemn utterances, but in her own heart she also was troubled about Dorothy.

Lord Darlington had casually said to his wife, just previous to starting for the day’s shooting: ‘Look here, Nina! that girl is too pretty and too young to be running about the world alone; get her to go back to her husband, if only for the sake of respectability.’

It was easy enough to enjoin this, but not so easy to carry out the command. Lady Darlington doubted whether she possessed the influence attributed to her. Though her heart was warm and loving, her powers of reasoning and logical argument would in these days of female orators have commanded but the veriest modicum of attention.

‘What shall I do? she asked therefore, somewhat plaintively, of her brother, whom she had inveigled for a few minutes’ talk into

the conservatory, while Lord Darlington was engaged in solemn colloquy with the stud-groom.

Hugo was always ready to listen, provided he might smoke, though he was not always so ready to answer.

‘What about?’ he asked. ‘Your little friend?’

‘Yes; do help me—suggest something.’

‘Make her play lawn-tennis on the asphalte court, or ride to hounds—nothing is so good for the spirits.’

‘Hugo, don’t be foolish; you know this affair is very serious. I am afraid, if it is not patched up somehow soon, it will end in a *real* separation; and that is utter destruction as far as the woman is concerned.’

‘Naturally; the world always shoves all the blame upon her, whether she deserves it or not, poor little soul!’

‘Always,’ said Lady Darlington, quietly accepting this irrational view of the respective responsibilities of men and women.

‘Where is she, by-the-bye, just now?’

‘Playing with the children in the nursery. Now does not that show a sweet and womanly disposition, and prove what a quantity of real good she must have in her? But though she is so nice and very serious, I can’t make the slightest

impression upon her. She used to be so fond of Mr. Chester, and thought him a perfect paragon; but nothing will satisfy her now but the idea of going out as a governess. Just think what a pity it would be—and she so attractive!’

‘Some fellow will fall in love with her, and then there will be a pretty kettle of fish!’ ejaculated Hugo from amidst volumes of smoke.

‘And that would be worse.’

‘Worse than what, Nina? She is in a mess now. I can’t for the life of me think what has come to Chester. He seemed a good sort of fellow enough; rather haw-haw, and that sort of thing, but a gentleman; and Johnnie Coote is devoted to him.’

‘Coote is with him now, is not he?’

‘Yes! A capital chap Coote, and a rare good judge of a gun, and the quickest eye in the world. I had a letter from him to-day,’ said Hugo, taking it out of his pocket.

‘What does he say?’

‘Well, it’s all about the sport he’s been having; there’s nothing much about Chester in it, except just this—“My host is still down in the dumps, but I do my best to liven him up.”’

‘There! you see they are both of them

miserable,' cried Lady Darlington impulsively. 'It really looks as if a good fairy were all that was required just to step in and say, "God bless you, my children."'

'You might be the good fairy yourself.'

'I! How? Quick! Tell me, Hugo.'

'Keep her here as your governess, and make her life a burden, until she wishes herself home again.'

'I never could be unkind to her, Hugo.'

'Oh, you need not trouble; leave that to the servants—they understand it. A governess is neither fish, flesh, nor fowl, so everyone gives her a pinch, just to see what she is made of.'

'Our governesses were never pinched, I am sure; mamma would not have allowed it.'

'Why, Nina, that's a figure of speech; but trust the servants to bring her down a peg.'

'If I thought it would do any good,' said his sister slowly; 'but I should not like her to be miserable.'

'It would only be the same sort of thing as a dose of physic; you feel awfully bad at the time, but afterwards you are as brisk as a bee. Well, good-bye, Nina; think over what I've said. I can't stop any longer, for Darlington

will be waiting. Take care of yourself, little girl.'

The position of a dependent—it sounded nasty, certainly. Lady Darlington did not exactly know what governesses felt, but she had a pretty shrewd suspicion of it: cold suppers, badly blacked boots, and a great deal of fatigue, annoyance, and loneliness, she was aware, would be some of the incidental disagreeables. Still, if in the end such an arrangement were conducive to Dorothy's happiness, it might be worth trying. Lady Darlington, stepping back into the drawing-room to ring for the cook and order dinner, decided she would make the proposition. Her diplomacy was of the most elementary kind. Fortunately it needed but little to insure a quiet *tête-à-tête* with Mrs. Chester. Luncheon was a ladies' meal, and devoted to the children, who dined at that hour. Hetty and Letty feasted royally on roast partridges and bread-sauce, which required to be chopped up small; even then a considerable portion being deposited on the respective pinafores, which seemed to possess a perverse inclination to ruck up or fall down or get in the way of the spoons with which the girls fed themselves, while their large heavy-lashed eyes roamed sportively round the

table, watching everything with the greatest interest except their own occupation, which should have reigned paramount in importance.

‘Here, dear Letty, take care; that was too large a mouthful. Some more jam with your pudding? — Eat a little faster, dear. No, Hetty, you have had enough!’ were some of the fond mother’s staccato interjections.

Hetty pouted, while two crystal drops oozed from her lashes.

‘Well, don’t cry, then. Please, Aunt Judy, give Hetty another jam-puff.’

‘Hetty shouldn’t cry for tarts; that’s naughty!’ said Aunt Judy reprovingly, holding up one skinny pale finger.

Hetty would have cried still more at this lecture, and was already preparing to droop the corners of her mouth in harmony with her sense of injury, but as at that instant the jam-tart was placed on her plate, she wisely decided to swallow the affront as well, and make the best of her time before the ladies rose to depart.

Grace said, pinafores cheerfully removed, and the children having run upstairs as noisily as though the partridge and tarts had flown to their heads, Lady Darlington aired her

diplomacy and made her little plans for the afternoon.

‘Aunt Judy, will you take Clara Harts-horne to see the new school? And then, as I have some letters to write, and shall not be ready to go out quite so soon, perhaps dear Dorothy will not mind waiting for me, and we can take a turn round the garden?’

Dorothy responded to the invitation with alacrity, and, punctually to orders, awaited her hostess in the large painted hall.

‘We will go to the garden,’ said the latter, when she came down, dressed in her dainty tight-fitting jacket and jaunty hat, ‘because we can go alone there; and if we drive, I shall have to take a groom. Darlington is so particular; his mother never went out without a servant at her heels, so he thinks it is necessary for me to do the same. Of course it’s a bore; but he is so kind, I don’t like to object.’ While she spoke, she took some formidable-looking keys from a basket that stood on the table. ‘These are the keys of the garden and park; you know everything is locked here, for fear of tramps.’

‘Are there many tramps, then?’

‘Not more than elsewhere; but it’s another old custom Darlington likes to keep up.’

By this time they had reached the large kitchen-garden, a model of its kind, sloped to the sun, intersected by broad gravel walks, and borders of sunflowers and dahlias, slightly touched by the night's frost.

‘Oh, the poor flowers!’ said her ladyship tenderly; ‘what a pity it is when these horrid frosts come! I am sure nobody likes them; and later on they stop hunting, and make us all cross.’

‘You are never cross, I am sure,’ said Dorothy, stooping to pick a piece of mignonette.

‘Sometimes; but now, Dorothy, let us talk business. Are you happy here?’

‘Very,’ said Dorothy, with a sigh.

‘Of course I take the expression as qualified—and are you still anxious to be a governess?’

‘Yes,’ Dorothy answered, with another sigh.

‘I ask, because you know I have for some time thought of getting a governess for Hetty and Letty. Poor angels, it seems hard to make their dear little heads ache with learning; but Clara says they ought to begin to read.’

‘And you were going to offer me the post?’ Dorothy raised her head, and her eyes sparkled.

‘If you will take it.’

‘You *dear* Nina—that I will ! Why, you are a regular good fairy to offer me the wish of my heart ! I am fond of children, and I know I can teach at least the alphabet—and then I should be near you—and it would not be quite such wretched exile. Thank you, dear ! But I forgot—we shall no longer be equals. I shall be your paid dependent, Lady Darlington.’

‘In the eyes of the world, perhaps ; but when we are alone—always my own dear friend.’

They walked a little way in silence after this, Lady Darlington’s sense of the proprieties being somewhat outraged at the offer she had herself made. Was it, she inwardly questioned, quite respectable for a real lady to demean herself by taking a salary ? Of course this was a unique occasion, but might it not be quoted against her in the future, and cause her some vague detriment ? Dorothy, on her part, was thinking that a definite aim, even so small a one as teaching spoilt children their letters, would prove a perfect godsend to her in her restless and miserable frame of mind.

‘How fortunate it is for us both that you are *booky*,’ said Nina presently, ‘as I am not a bit so.’

‘Do you never read, then?’

‘Never! I have no time.’

‘But you must have occasional spare moments?’

‘No. I have such a quantity to do. First, you see, there are orders to give to the cook and the butler; then letters to write, invitations to send, clothes to choose for the children; then I must take walks, and besides that, I run up and down to the nursery twenty times a day. Oh yes, the mistress of a house is very hard-worked, I can tell you; besides, I consider reading waste of time—one can be better employed than in reading novels!’

‘You might read history.’

‘My dear, I left the schoolroom years ago. That is all very well for you, who seem to crave after “ologies,” and such like; but where, pray, is the use of history—to me at least? It only teaches one about a number of men and women, who were kings and queens, and statesmen and generals, and lived years ago, before there were carpets and windows, or French cooking, or even baths; who were uncivilized in their habits, and had plenty of bad qualities, and killed one another, and quarrelled, and made lots of mistakes, just as we do. I can look round among my

friends and find plenty of frightful examples, quite as useful as any in history, I can assure you.'

'But it is interesting to trace the rise of institutions, and study the progress of the human mind, of art, science and letters.'

'That does not interest *me*. If the institutions are there, and are good, I profit gratefully by them ; but I don't wish to pry into their origin any more than I care to pull up a seed to see how it is growing. I never wish to know what my food is made of, nor what poison I am unconsciously imbibing, nor the number of bones in my body, nor the Latin names for plants and flowers, which smell sweet and please me just as they are; and I abhor the chronology of the Saxon Kings. My own home, my friends and family, my duties, are quite sufficient for me; and, indeed, so they ought to be for any sensible woman, unless she is a burrowing bookworm.'

'You are not flattering to me; but I suppose you would like the girls taught history?'

'Poor darlings !—very little of it goes a long way. Books have not given *you* happiness, Dorothy.'

By this time they had reached the garden-

gate; and Lady Darlington suggested the advisability of their return, as the children's tea-time was approaching.

Considerable astonishment was expressed by the company when informed that Mrs. Chester had accepted the post of governess to Lady Darlington's children.

'Nursery-governess, you know, my dear, I call it, with those babies!' said Mrs. Harts-horne, lifting her eyebrows; '*my* nursery-governess—and I had several, and know the tricks of the tribe well—never dined downstairs.'

'But Mrs. Chester's birth and position will make a difference,' remarked Miss Mytten sagaciously.

'I don't know. If I were Nina, I should make her keep her place; a false position is always productive of discomfort.'

Dorothy, however, saved her friends any trouble, for she stoically grasped the necessary facts; requested to be allotted the governess's apartment at once, vacating without a murmur her fine visitor's room, and passed her evenings in the schoolroom, only consenting to relax this rule on Sundays, when sacred music was played in the drawing-room, and Lord Darlington read prayers to the whole retinue

of servants. The latter soon set themselves, according to Captain Limber's prediction, to pull Dorothy down a peg. The footman passed her with a supercilious stare, the butler forgot to hand her wine at dinner, the housemaid grumbled at the extra work entailed by carrying up the governess's supper-tray, and the nurse invented every possible pretext for detaining the children in the nursery. But Dorothy was firm. If the children were well, they must not miss their lessons; and the poor little things, though carefully instructed in the art of secret mutiny by the nurse, and having come prepared to be naughty, soon recognised her mild rule, and stayed, magnetized by her sweet voice and manner, to learn industry and goodness. Dorothy herself, quiet and peaceful in her new avocations, forgot some of her troubles in the exercise of her monotonous and soothing employment; the evenings she devoted to study, and the long walks she took with the little girls kept her in good health and revived her spirits.

Lady Darlington, according to her brother's directions, trying, in spite of herself, to keep up the distinction of employer and dependent, ran in very frequently to enjoy a chat with her governess—to consult her about a dress

or a flower, or to order her out into the park to catch a glimpse of the hounds. Not the least happy portion of the day was the hour of schoolroom tea, when the children, established at the table in their high chairs and pinafores, solemnly munched bread and butter; Dorothy pouring out the tea, and Nina with Baby John on her lap talking indefatigably. The plan invented by Captain Limber, with Machiavellian design, seemed to answer perfectly.

‘I really think,’ said Lady Darlington to her brother, after some days—‘I really think Dorothy is *too* happy, and that she will never want to go home again. She seems quite contented.’

‘Trust her to want to go home again,’ said Captain Limber. ‘She is a good-plucked un, I allow, but she will hanker after liberty at last. Fancy being penned up all day with those brats!’

‘They are very good children,’ answered his sister, bridling.

‘So they may be, but they are mischievous imps, all the same; and you won’t make me believe that a pretty girl like that can care to pass all her life teaching the alphabet, and never seeing a living soul but you.’

Lady Darlington thought it unlikely, but she was learning to distrust her own judgment with regard to Dorothy, who had already disappointed so many of her previsions. For herself, she could not have existed a day in dudgeon with Lord Darlington. If he had frowned, she must have laughed at him; if he had turned coldly from her, she must have thrown her arms around his neck. Quarrelling was but the prelude to reconciliation, and the taste of snarling made kissing all the sweeter.





CHAPTER VIII.

KEITH TALKS POLITICS.

IT is time now to return to Mr. Chester, and to the events that followed his wife's departure. He had been stung and wounded by her conduct more than by any occurrence of his life; that she should have the courage to leave the shelter of his roof, and subsequently show neither regret nor affection, touched him to the quick. Reproaches and recriminations he would have thought natural, but dignified silence and firmness, the offspring of duty, astonished and found him defenceless. He had believed in the power of her love; he had not reckoned on the strength of her conscience. And now, out of perversity, just because he had lost her, he wanted her back impatiently.

While he was thus fuming and fretting, Coote arrived, full of concern and real sympathy, which he found it impossible to put into words. Condolences were always difficult—how much more so in a delicate matter like the present, when blame and palliation alike seemed to jar.

Keith was moody and gloomy, given to long fits of silence or snatches of feverish talk—a very trying companion. Coote was bright, genial, and interested in all the affairs of the place—in the farm, and the hounds, and the shooting. He thought it his duty to discourage confidences, believing in the efficacy of oblivion wrought by physical fatigue and occupation. The gamekeeper was kept on the alert, the fields were thoroughly shot over; the partridges had a rare bad time of it—but Dorothy's name was never mentioned. The two men smoked and played billiards; occasionally Keith touched his violin while Coote made up his game-book: but none of these insidious devices for killing time dispelled the gloom from Keith's brow, or witched away the stern lines that had gathered around his mouth. He was beginning to age. There was no doubt of it; and his complexion grew sallow. One evening—it was the evening

after his encounter with Dorothy—he broke out:

‘Johnnie, my boy, this is a miserable life! I don’t think I can endure it much longer. It is bad enough to be tricked and fooled by a woman: those things made me smile formerly, now they madden me. The worst of it is, Johnnie, I did love her. She may not have thought it—for I have such a cold undemonstrative nature—but I *did* love her. I loved her little fair head, so trimly-braided, and her gentle quiet ways, like those of a soft dove nestling in one’s bosom; and now—I miss her, I want her, and she is gone for ever!’

‘Time is a great ally,’ quoth Johnnie, puffing formidably.

‘In some things, yes; but I fear Dorothy despises me—she thinks the very worst, she puts the hardest construction on all my doings. Just imagine being despised by a woman; it is far worse than to be hated!’

‘You are fortunate not to be hated as well. I think you managed badly, Keith.’

‘I know I did—disgracefully. I ought to have kept her affections, such a simple little thing as she appeared—but I thought her love was proof against all my errors. That con-

science of some women is a damned sort of thing, Johnnie.'

Yes, Johnnie supposed women *had* sensitive consciences—one must humour them.

'You queer fellow,' Keith laughed drily; 'I wonder much what kind of harmony will exist between you and your wife. She will rule you, I'll be bound.'

'If she rules pleasantly, she may.'

'I suppose I must make up my mind to this—eh, Johnnie? "*Homme propose, femme dispose.*" I had meant to lead a humdrum life, but that is all knocked on the head now. Find me an occupation, Johnnie; I must have something to do. You suggested marriage once—that has not answered, so try again. I give you another chance. What am I good for still?'

'Why give up so tamely? I think you might and *ought* to get back your wife.'

'I *might*, no doubt, by an exercise of authority; but I have no fancy to play the despot. A patient victim at my side would bore me. I had sooner be free and alone.'

'Well then, in other ways. There's the farm—Flint is an old-fashioned duffer—I was talking to him to-day; all his theories are exploded now. Why not ride about and visit your estate—steam-plough your land—go

in for grazing and high farming—make acquaintance with your tenants, breed prize short-horns?’

‘No, I hate farming; it means arrears of rent, constant complaints of floods or sheep-rot or pleuro-pneumonia, draining and building, and all kinds of expense.’

‘Music?’

‘Music needs a listener, and I have none, and recalls memories of associations which I wish to forget; besides, music emasculates, and I must grow strong.’

‘There you are right. I never had much of an ear for music myself, though I like well enough to hear my sisters strum. Shooting and hunting?’

‘Both excellent recipes for a good night’s rest, but not otherwise absorbing.’

‘Travels—politics?’

‘Politics! Ha! perhaps you have hit it. I might care for them; they mean excitement, vigorous thought—worthy of a man.’

‘Pity you are a Liberal!’

‘Great pity, isn’t it? But politics shall never destroy our friendship; we will keep the two separate — as separate as peace and love. Politics! The great game of chess played by statesmen, with nations for their pieces; a

science that prates of patriotism, progress, enlightenment, truth, justice, liberty—I know it all; haven't I written articles innumerable for the *Universal Review*? That is what we *say*. What we *think* is, politics is a game of brag and lying, played with the sham counters of deceit, mean shifts, low ambitions, dishonest dealings, paltry evasions, knaves outwitting one another for gain, and laughing at honest fools. What say you? It might stir a man's nerves and bid him live. Ambition is the masculine of love; it contains pith and marrow. I have a mind to try it.'

'By all means,' responded Johnnie, enchanted to have found a spur for his friend's laggard energies.

'Johnnie, how I envy you! You are content with a little—I *never* am! I have always been striving for some good which, when I have attained, has eluded my grasp. Pleasure, popularity, riches, marriage, have disappointed me in turn—nothing has contented me yet.'

'You exact too much, I think. There is no such thing as perfection—so many people are all the pleasanter, because they are not perfect.'

'Sagacious boy! you speak wisely, and I

am going to behave wisely. It is a pity I did not marry one of your sisters, Johnnie.'

'By Jove it *is*, Keith! They are such good girls.'

Keith made a grimace.

'I don't think I should have got on with a *good* girl; and now I am going to be a statesman, plot deeply, plan craftily, and study the mob's caprices, so that eventually *I* may rule while the people think they are ruling me.'

'If you were a Conservative, you would not need to be insincere.'

'I am not insincere; but no man is such a fool as to bring up a two-year-old sharp on its haunches with a severe curb the first day he breaks it in. The people, like the young horse, must be educated.'

'*We* have the education, and their business is to follow our lead.'

'The days for that are past, Johnnie; the people will soon be our masters, for all we can spell, if we do not make haste to keep ahead of them.'

'It is *gentlemen*, fellows like you, of old family and great associations, that do the harm, pretending that you are what no *gentleman* can be—a Radical.'

'I don't *pretend*, and I am not a Radical.'

‘You are drifting that way, at least. Forty years ago you would have been a Chartist.’

‘To confess the truth, I never cared to embrace the dull old party of respectability ; it freezes the blood in one’s veins. I had as soon be an automaton.’

‘Take care you are not a puppet in the hands of the great unwashed, which is worse,’ retorted Johnnie, rising to light another cigar.

Keith did not answer, as he would have done formerly, with a maxim of La Rochefoucauld’s. He needed none of the old Frenchman’s bitter sarcasm to serve as a fillip. He was sour and cynical enough himself now in all conscience, and he felt, if he did not express in the words of the philosopher, ‘On donne des conseils, mais on n’inspire pas la sagesse pour en profiter.’

Johnnie had very good-naturedly put off his own annual party for the 1st of September, and contented himself with the society of his friend and some very indifferent partridge-shooting, walking after dogs in the old-fashioned style, instead of enjoying the well-organized drives and heavy bags which at home would have fallen to his lot. Yet it

must be confessed that there was a selfish side to his good-nature, for was not the brilliant Margaret residing in the village, and was it not tacitly accepted that he should make an almost daily pilgrimage to the Angel House, to inquire for the latest news and ask if Dorothy showed signs of relenting? And when it chanced that there was no particular news, and gossip was slack, what more natural than that he should linger a while talking and advising with Margaret; or that occasionally she should put on her bonnet and walk part of the way with him in the bright autumn sunshine?

A teasing, tormenting girl was Margaret—never soft, never sentimental, but as crisp and sparkling as crackling snow, as refreshing as the rush of a mountain torrent. She astonished Johnnie, and kept him spell-bound. His sisters were very different, so quiet and proper; yet she lived more in the country than they did, and had never even been presented at Court. Withal she was exceedingly practical—said she did not believe in love, and would prefer to repent in a coach-and-six—‘for repent I suppose one must, whatever one does, and I should like it made as easy as possible.’ Margaret had recognised the error of her ways

since the day when she had sneered at her mother for talking of marriage as a profession. She had discovered that not only was it an end in itself, but a stepping-stone to all the pleasures she coveted — play-going, pretty dresses, fun, and good dinners, and lively company. When she was married she could have all these ; *ergo*, she would make haste to get married. But the only eligible young man that presented himself was Johnnie, and *he* solemnly informed her that he hated going to balls, and intended to marry a sober wife, who would be contented to live in the country.

‘I hate the country,’ said Margaret, in her gay aggravating manner ; ‘I hate the little lambs in the green fields and the lowing of cows, and the muddy roads and the nightingales’ songs—I have had so much of them. I want to go to Paris and London, and see the shops, and buy whatever I like.’

‘You would soon get tired of it.’

‘Never! I could walk up and down Regent Street all day, and only want to go home when I felt hungry.’

‘There is nothing to be done in a town.’

‘Nothing to be done ! When there is

dancing, and dining, and flirting! I adore flirting.'

'You don't mean it; you only say so to tease me!'

'Why should it tease you? I suppose it is no business of yours *whom* I flirt with!'

'Flirts are horrid!'

'Prigs are worse! Mr. Coote, you are fast becoming a prig and a lecturer.'

'Miss Strait, you are fast becoming giddy and impertinent.'

'I had rather be giddy than stupid. The one amuses, the other sends you to sleep.'

'No one could sleep in your company.'

'Thank you, Mr. Coote; that is a compliment—the first you have paid me to-day; it means that I am exceedingly agreeable.'

'You may put that construction on it if you like.'

'I shall not fail. Why, appreciation on the part of others is the only reward I ask for my pains,' she said, laughing.

On one occasion, as they walked and talked thus, they were met by Mrs. Maynard, who, having first drawn herself up a little stiffly, then shook hands cordially with Margaret, and finally threw one of her bewitching looks at Johnnie, a habit which she found irresistible

in the presence of a young man. But those looks were wasted upon him now; he noticed that her eyes were large and languishing, the lashes dark and curved, and the lids drooping, but these beauties no longer thrilled him. She was a pretty woman, certainly, but she did not appeal to his imagination nor his fancy.

‘Is it true,’ Mrs. Maynard exclaimed, almost before she had finished her greeting—‘is it true that your sister has gone out as governess to Lady Darlington? I heard the news just now from Mrs. Horsfall, who had it from her husband; but I really could not believe it. It seems so strange—so eccentric!’

‘It is quite true,’ answered Margaret coldly. ‘My sister dislikes idleness.’

‘Well, there were other things for her to do. But, of course, it is not my place to advise, though I must say the position of a governess is exceedingly trying. I am qualified to speak, for unfortunately I was a governess myself for a little while, and I detested it thoroughly; so will your sister very soon, you may be sure. However, people must buy their experience, only dear Dorothy is the very last person suited for such a thing—so very exclusive and particular as she always was.

‘If my sister had not been suitable, I don’t suppose Lady Darlington would have engaged her,’ said Margaret, tossing her head pertly.

‘Of course, we all know Mrs. Chester is very clever.’

‘Certainly!’ remarked Johnnie, coming to the rescue.

‘Dear me! No one ever disputed it. She never cared to talk to us—we weren’t intellectual enough for her. Many a time I’ve said to my husband—who you know is very fond of reading books written by the Fathers, and very big ones they are—“Charles dear, our companionship is not enough for Dorothy. Don’t ask her to tea; she needs the society of men, literary men.”’

‘I am sure my sister never complained of her surroundings,’ said Margaret tetchily. ‘She was too much of a lady to turn up her nose at anyone.’

‘If she didn’t turn up her nose (perhaps she couldn’t, as it was a Greek nose), she looked it in her eyes. She was sad-looking, and girls of that uncommon appearance always have a yearning; they never settle down like commonplace people. Well, she flew at high game, and it has not answered; perhaps the governess plan will do better, but I am afraid

not. We are all so concerned about her, you know—her sorrows have quite cast a gloom over everything.’

Margaret moved impatiently.

‘It is true, I assure you,’ pursued the implacable Mrs. Maynard. ‘Mrs. Parkinson cried about it the other night, and quite forgot to stroke the cats every five minutes, as she generally does. Well, well! Girls never know their own minds. But I am keeping you?’ Neither made a motion of dissent. ‘You were going for a walk. Are you making a long stay here, Mr. Coote? Perhaps some day, as you are fond of a stroll, you will find your way to our poor house. It is small, as you know; we are not *fine* people, but we shall give you a hearty welcome. And how is Mr. Chester? The whole affair is deplorable, isn’t it? We are so very sorry for him.’ She passed on, smiling and bowing.

‘What a detestable woman! How I should like to strangle her!’ cried Margaret, when they were out of earshot. ‘To listen to her talk is like playing on a comb—there is something rasping about her. She sets your teeth on edge with her eternal smile, and her soft voice, and those fawnlike simple glances she throws, while all the time you know she is tearing

you and your dress and your belongings and your character to shreds.'

'I suppose she is jealous?'

'Of what? Such a creature to be the wife of a clergyman!—there is not a drop of Christian charity in her composition. I cannot understand how the Vicar can endure her. He must really be a very good man.'

'She has quite upset you, Miss Strait—you have turned pale. How I wish we had not met her!'

'That tongue of hers stabs. Poor Dorothy, I believe she hates her. Whatever I may say in haste sometimes, I am very fond of my sister, and I cannot bear to hear her discussed.'

'Certainly not, and you are so warm-hearted. I wish—I am so sorry,' repeated Johnnie with concern, holding Margaret's hand as they now stood just outside the entrance to Blackness, on the spot where they habitually parted. 'I am so sorry—Margaret, let me walk home with you.'

'How ridiculous you are!' she said with a laugh, one of those merry heartless laughs which he dreaded and yet loved to hear, they were so infectious, but so hopeless. No girl could be even in the least in love who laughed thus, and Johnnie was beginning to wish she

were a little less composed and confiding. He had called her 'Margaret' for the first time, and she had not even seemed to hear.

'Do let me, *dear* Margaret. I should like to walk back again, it is quite early.'

'For all the village to remark that we are seeing one another home, like drunken men. No thank you, dear, dearer, dearest Mr. Coote.'

'You are very cruel to laugh at me.'

'You would not have me cry with you? Goodness knows there is enough sorrow in the world !'

'I had not finished telling you about my home and the girls ; I want you to know my sisters.'

'I know—one is tall and dark, and the other has red hair ; one visits the poor, and the other paints on china ; and one is called Dolly, and the other Agatha. Why, Mr. Coote, you have said it all before.'

'Let me say it again then.'

'Not to-day. Please to let go my hand—there is some one coming. Good-bye, Mr. Coote.'

'Well, if it must be, good-bye, Miss Strait.'

'And next time bring the heads of your

conversation dotted down on paper, the ages and birthdays of your sisters, etc., and then you won't forget to tell me,' Margaret cried over her shoulder, with another laugh.





CHAPTER IX.

DOROTHY KEEPS HER OWN SECRETS.

‘**S**O Chester means to stand for Slowchester at the next election,’ said Lord Darlington, reading his letters while he partook of a hearty breakfast. ‘I never thought he was at all in that line; should have imagined him to be too indolent. Horsfall says they are to have a big meeting in the Corn Exchange, and that Chester is to speak on the Irish question.’

‘What the deuce can he know about it?’ said the Major, sprinkling the kidneys on his plate plentifully with cayenne pepper.

‘As much as his neighbours know, I suppose,’ observed Hugo quietly. ‘It is easy enough to be a Radical; you have only got to abuse everything and everybody—just drawing the line at the Queen—and say the army is going

to smash, and that the taxes must be reduced. You are sure to hit the right nail on the head that way. You need only find fault ; you needn't suggest a remedy.'

'Has Mr. Chester quite recovered his wife's loss, then?' asked Mrs. Hartshorne, who had drawn her knitting from her pocket, as soon as she had consumed the tea and toast which formed the staple of her matutinal meal, the clicking of her knitting-needles constituting a kind of feeble protest against the greedy appetites of man. In such like petty revenges, to which, however, no one ever paid attention (the Major having been known aggravatingly to remark that he believed knitting assisted his wife's digestion), Mrs. Hartshorne found compensation for the despotism under which she groaned.

'Probably,' answered Lord Darlington. 'The whole thing was a mistake, and I suppose they were not really suited to one another.'

'She is the best of governesses,' said Lady Darlington warmly.

'And the worst of wives,' grumbled the Major.

'I don't see why you should say that ; we really don't know the real facts of the case.'

'When a woman keeps her own secrets, they

are generally secrets that tell against herself,' snapped the Major.

'I am sure I never keep secrets from you, dear,' remarked Mrs. Hartshorne amiably.

'I was not referring to *your* affairs, Clara; I wish you would not be so confoundedly personal. Only a clever woman can keep a secret.'

Clara's eyes filled with tears. She had cultivated a habit of keeping nothing to herself, in the hope that this show of catholic trust in her husband would gratify his vanity; and now he actually asserted that only clever women kept secrets. Lord Darlington kindly took the sting out of the Major's remark by saying:

'Well, I agree with Hartshorne—women who have secrets are not pleasant companions. I always abhorred mysteries, even in story-books, where one expects to find ghosts in cupboards, and secret drawers, and wills stuffed behind pictures, and such like trash. I like plain above-board everyday things; no blind fences, where you can't see what you're riding at.'

'Shall I tell Dorothy about her husband standing for Parliament?' asked Lady Darlington.

'Certainly, Nina; let us have no secrets.

But doesn't she correspond with him? She knows all about it already, I should think.'

'No; I am convinced she never writes. I am only thinking it might make her unhappy; she will imagine he has consoled himself.'

'And a very good thing too,' said the Major dogmatically, 'as long as she persists in playing the fool.'

'I wish you would not be so bitter,' said her ladyship, almost angrily, 'when you know how fond I am of her.'

'Well, my lady, I never approved of your romantic notion of keeping her here,' remarked Lord Darlington, taking a great draught of cold water at the sideboard, the usual termination to his copious breakfast; 'the kindest thing you can do, is to pack her back again to her husband.'

'Hugo advised me,' said her ladyship plaintively.

'Then Hugo must stand the consequences,' said Lord Darlington, stumping off to have a look at the horses.

Lady Darlington turned to her brother:

'Now, Hugo, it is too bad of you not to say a word. Did you not advise me?'

'I did,' said Hugo unconcernedly, 'on the principle of the apprentice in a pastry-cook's

shop : if you give him enough tarts, he'll have such a sickener that he'll never eat any more. I suspect six months of drudgery and school-work will cure our pretty friend of having her own way. And for my part, I'm awfully glad Chester is going to stand, though I hope he won't get in ; there's always a row at a contested election, and a likelihood of the soldiers being called out. I should like to get a chance of punching some of the fellows' heads.'

In the course of the afternoon Lady Darlington mounted to the precincts of the school-room. All was quiet there. The two little girls were in the nursery having their hair brushed and their hands and faces washed ; the cloth for tea was partly laid ; Hannah had gone down for the toast and eggs, leaving the kettle singing on the hob ; and in the window-seat sat Dorothy in her plain grey merino, reading. She put down her book on her employer's entrance.

'You will try your eyes, Dorothy ; the red light of the setting sun is the very worst light for reading.'

'I was only just finishing a chapter. The children will be here directly, Lady Darlington ; shall I fetch them ?'

'No, no ; can't you realize that I sometimes

want a chat with you, Dorothy ?' said her ladyship impatiently, seating herself in the window-seat ; then, taking Dorothy's hand in hers, drawing her down beside her : ' I have heard some news of Mr. Chester to-day.'

' Have you indeed ?' Dorothy's delicate colour flickered on her cheeks, and she kept her eyes bent down.

' Should not you like to hear it ?'

' As you please.'

' " As you please," you quaint creature ! why, I wish to please *you*. Does it distress you to hear about your husband, and have you really ceased to care for him ?'

' It does not distress me.'

' Well, then, listen : he has begun to take a part in public affairs—speaks at a meeting in Slowchester to-day, and intends to become a candidate for Parliament.'

' Will he succeed ?'

' I don't know ; I hope so, for your sake. But do you not consider that a wife by his side to help him canvass, to share his hopes and fears, and cheer him in his anxious hours, would materially assist success ?'

' It might do so under some circumstances.'

' Dorothy, have you no heart ? Do you never feel that it is sweet to be loved ; you seem to

like my children ; have you never thought that you could have some of your own to love and caress you ?’

‘ God forbid !’ ejaculated Dorothy.

‘ My dear child, make a clean breast of your sorrows to me ; tell me what it is that stands between you and your husband. I swear I will not betray your confidence ; trust me—tell me all.’

‘ Lady Darlington,’ said the governess, rising and clasping her hands before her, ‘ I came here to teach your children, and to be their governess. Have I failed in any way—are you not satisfied with me ?’

‘ Perfectly ; but, Dorothy——’

‘ Then I must beg you not to urge me any more. Each has a right to live his own life as best he can ; you cannot judge for me. I will do my duty to you, but I cannot allow you the privilege of dictating to me about my private affairs. I will not be unnerved by entreaties and persuasions ; believe me, it is hard enough to do my duty, Lady Darlington.’

‘ Yet surely it might be made pleasant to you. I am your friend—I mean kindly by you.’

‘ Were the path made pleasant, it would no longer be duty. If it distresses you to see me here, to know that I am the one suffering

person in a house where everyone is happy, let me go and earn my bread elsewhere.'

'Dorothy, how can you speak so! You know I will not part with you. Dear Dorothy, you are so changed. Look at me, darling!'

'I am changed, I know,' said Dorothy gently, 'but not in my feelings for you; those feelings are strong and sure. Do not believe I can ever forget your kindness, and your real loving sympathy. You took me in, and helped me when appearances were against me, and many another would have turned away, and feared to meddle. I am grateful in my own way, but pray do not try to shake my determination.'

'I have not got your force of character,' said Lady Darlington sadly, 'and I could not keep my sorrows to myself as you do.'

Dorothy smiled—a sweet pathetic smile.

'May you never need to do so!'

'Mr. Maynard is coming here to-morrow,' said her ladyship, still lingering; 'he wishes to talk to me about some charitable scheme. Would you care for a few words with him? Perhaps you might be induced to give *him* your confidence, though you will not trust *me*.'

'It is not that I do not trust you,' said

Dorothy, opening the door for Lady Darlington to pass out—‘it is not that. No, thank you; I had rather not see Mr. Maynard. He was always opposed to my marriage, and he would say I richly deserved my fate.’

‘I scarcely think so; he is too charitable. And you will not be persuaded to come into the drawing-room to-night? I expect Lady Lancelot and her daughters; it might cheer you.’

Dorothy shook her head, and the little lady, baffled in all her kind schemes, retreated. Dorothy closed the door after her, and returned to the window-seat, but the engrossing book had lost its charm. She turned the pages, but their meaning was sealed to her. Hannah presently appeared, bearing a tray. Soon the fragrance of tea and toast filled the room, and the little girls trooped in merrily.

‘Muffins! oh, how nice! Mrs. Chester, do come and look; let us make haste to eat them before they are cold.’

Dorothy drew her chair near the table, and proceeded to dispense tea to her charges, who chatted and asked questions, nowise daunted by her rare and absent replies. But when the cloth was removed and the gay infants had run off to their mamma, and the schoolroom was

again still and quiet, and the lamp beside her her only company, helpless loneliness oppressed her; she laid her arms on the table and sobbed. She dared not entertain the smallest hope of Keith's innocence; he had tacitly confessed his guilt by denying nothing, and attempting no exculpation. He must have known that the bitter knowledge was gnawing at her heart, yet he had not offered her one word of hope or comfort; he had called crime a youthful folly, and flippantly declared the world was not governed by purist notions; he had persisted in keeping riches wrongfully acquired, and had sneered at her romantic folly in wishing to renounce them. And yet he was still Keith—still her love—her own choice—her husband—her all! Some day, possibly, contempt would step in and bid her forget; but as yet her heart beat only with tenderest pity. She had thought he might be suffering, crying out for her in despair, longing to retrieve; and just now she had learnt that he was busily working in the world of politics, drawn into a new vortex of business and interest. What did her great love signify to him? He had won it and cast it away. What did *he* care that she was only a poor lonely governess, breaking her heart for him?

Perhaps, though, her harshness had been at fault: he had pleaded and she had refused. It was her own blunder, but she had always despised people who rebelled against the inevitable: plainly there was nothing to be done now but to bear her lot with patience and be silent. Where had she read, 'Divine justice is patient because it has eternity behind it?' She had no eternity to help *her*.

The next day was fine. After luncheon, Dorothy's pupils went for a drive with Lady Darlington and her guests, and the governess remained alone. She walked now every day from necessity, until the habit had become endeared to her. So she put on her bonnet and went out as usual. September was nearly over; the air was frosty, and inclined her for exercise, and she determined to leave the shrubbery, and pursue the high-road, which was dry and pleasant. She had not long passed the lodge gates, when she caught sight of a man sitting by the roadside. Believing him to be a tramp, she scarcely noticed him, when he quickly rose to his feet, and confronted her.

'Joynte!' she cried, under her breath.

He answered, with his usual jaunty assurance, though his appearance was considerably more sickly and poverty-stricken.

‘ Mrs. Chester, I was on my way to see you.’

‘ What—did—you—want ?’ she could only articulate slowly.

Fear and surprise had robbed her of the readiness of speech ; and the scene in the gondola at Venice, the nightmare of so many sleepless nights, recurred with fresh horror to her memory.

‘ Nothing unusual ; just the same old story—money. I’m as poor as ever, you see.’

He took up a flap of his ragged coat and showed it to her.

‘ I can do nothing for you.’

‘ Oh, indeed—you can’t ? You said so once before, but on that occasion you also said you would speak to Mr. Chester, and never kept your word. I always keep *my* word. I told you I would dog you, and here I am—with some trouble, too. I had to come over to England with what little cash I could scrape together. Fortunately the lottery had been favourable. I called at Blackness, rang the bell boldly, was told by an insolent flunkey that you were *here* (that fine park is Lord Darlington’s, isn’t it ?) ; and then my good luck favoured me, and I met you. Shall we walk a little together while you tell me what you are going to do for me ?’

‘I can do nothing for you,’ said Dorothy, whose blanched lips quivered visibly—‘nothing. I am not with Mr. Chester now. I am the governess here.’

‘The deuce!’ A shrill whistle broke from Joynte. ‘Then you hate him now as much as I do? Wasn’t your marriage legal? Did he play you a trick? Ha! that’s good!’

‘I do not hate Mr. Chester. He is my husband.’

‘You’re not going to turn a soft idiot, are you, when he has treated you so badly? I thought you were a woman of spirit.’

‘Spirit does not consist in trying to injure those we love. That would be cowardice.’

‘As you please, I’m not going to split fine words with you, but Mr. Chester has behaved like a cur. You must hate him as much as I do.’

‘Mr. Chester has not treated me badly. If I am not at present living in his house, it is because I do not choose it.’

‘Like some one else better—eh?’

‘How dare you say such vile things!’ Dorothy’s eyes flashed. ‘How dare you come here to poison my peace and destroy my love! What am I to you, that you should utter your false and horrible insinuations in my ears? I’ll listen no more. Go away!’

‘Tut, tut, ma’am ! no offence—only I’d just like you to say plain out if you are a friend or an enemy. It’s about time for this absurd humbug to cease. Are you going to give me my rights, or not ?’

‘I cannot give you your rights. Why don’t you ask a lawyer to advise you ?’

‘Of course. I’ll go to one at once. I’m a poor beggar now, but I can have plenty of money some day ; and then, when all the world knows that Mr. Chester mur——’

‘Stop ! What do you want—money ? How much will content you ?’

‘That depends— a couple of hundred might not come amiss for a little while.’

‘If I can—I have no money, but I will see what is possible. Will you leave Mr. Chester in peace ? How can I have any security that you will not annoy him again—that you will go out of the country ?’

‘Ah, now you’re speaking like the real lady I always thought you. You don’t love Mr. Chester, but you don’t wish to see him worried ; it is a proper feeling enough. Get me the money, as I know you can, and you shall not have cause to complain.’ He pointed to a distant spire. ‘There, in that village, at the Green Man public-house, I’ll wait for

a few days. If the money is not forthcoming then, Mr. Chester must look out. And of course, ma'am, you'll be sorry.'

'I can rely upon you?' she asked, wrapping her cloak more tightly round her.

'As sure as I'm a gentleman.'

She waited to hear no more, but struck quickly in at the lodge-gate. Joynte did not attempt to follow her. Once more within the safe precincts of her schoolroom, she breathed again; yet there was no time to reflect or decide, for the little girls had returned from their drive, and waited for their lessons to begin. It was only in the watches of the night, when she lay awake tossing restlessly on her bed, that her wild unruly thoughts formulated themselves into a concrete shape and that a reasonable way of escape presented itself to her perplexed mind.

Some days after writing to Margaret to announce her intention of taking a governess's post at Lovemere, she had received a letter from Keith, enclosing a remittance of £200. It was a kind letter, and though she had not answered it, she remembered every word.

'I cannot let you earn your bread, my darling,' he said, 'as I hear from Margaret you intend doing. No one shall have the power to

say I neglected you, or failed in what is a duty and a privilege. If you will not love me, you must at least accept from me what is right and fitting, as long as you are my wife. Some day, perhaps, you will learn to feel more kindly towards me.'

She had shed many tears over this letter, kissed it, and finally buried it in the deepest recesses of a drawer, firmly determined never to avail herself of his generosity. Yet the thought of his care touched her; it was not indifferent to him if she felt privations or inconvenience, for he had taken thought and trouble for her welfare. The money she could never touch, but the feeling that had prompted him to send it was indeed precious to her. And now, to save his honour and his peace, to save him from shame and disgrace, she might surely use the money—*his* money! And the longer she pondered, the more some inner monitor whispered to her that she was right. A sense of composure stole over her gradually, wrapped in which her eyes closed gently, her limbs relaxed, and she fell asleep.



CHAPTER X.

SUNDAY AT LOVEMERE.

THE next day was Sunday. Impossible to put her plan in action, for her time was too completely taken up; but early on Monday she resolved nothing should prevent her seeing Joynte. The schoolroom breakfast took place later than on weekdays, and was succeeded by a repetition of the Catechism and Collect for the day. At half-past ten a bell rang, summoning the household to prepare for church; and a quarter of an hour after another bell rang, at the sound of which the church-goers were marshalled in the hall; and Lady Darlington, preceded by the footman and prayer-books, conducted the procession to divine worship. Dorothy shrank from this to-day, for she knew guests had arrived, strangers to her: Lady Lancelot, her

son Lord Lancelot, and two daughters—fine people, who, perhaps knowing her history, would stare at her uncomfortably. But there was no way of escape. For the governess to eschew morning service without reason would, she knew, be considered unpardonable—a governess being required to set the example of piety and early rising. Moreover, Dorothy particularly disliked claiming any privilege which would not have been accorded to an ordinary teacher. So she took her prayer-book in one hand and Hetty's little fingers in the other, and descended the slippery oak staircase while the bell still clanged out its loudest.

Lady Darlington was already in the hall, and a gaunt elderly lady in silks and feathers, with two tall girls, one plump and pretty, the other faded-looking, having a discontented droop of the mouth. The party collected rapidly. The Major and Mrs. Hartshorne and Lord Darlington appeared from opposite doors, but Lady Darlington still waited, looking round expectantly.

‘Is not Hugo coming?’ she said, ‘and Lord Lancelot?’

‘Hugo is not coming,’ promptly answered

Mrs. Hartshorne. 'He and Lord Lancelot have arranged to stay at home and smoke.'

Mrs. Hartshorne disapproved of Captain Limber, who was good-tempered and careless, and laughed when the Major fussed. 'A pagan idler,' she called him, and hated him accordingly, so she was not sorry to have the opportunity of publicly mentioning this lapse of propriety.

'I wish he would come,' said Lady Darlington.

'It is no use,' observed Lady Lancelot, whose voice had a rasping quality. 'You cannot get young men to church, do what you will, unless they are married, and go to please their wives. Lancelot is hopeless. I have ceased to worry about him. Better let them alone.'

Lady Darlington bit her lip, and, slipping her arm into that of her husband, walked on. The guests followed, not seeming to notice the presence of the plainly clad governess, humbly bringing up the rear with her pupils. That they had, however, noticed her became evident from a whispered remark Miss Alice, the plump and pretty girl, threw to her sister.

'Look, Julia—is her hair dyed, do you think?'

‘Whose?’ answered Julia crossly, trying to get her hands into her long Swedish gloves as quickly as possible.

‘Why, the govey’s, to be sure.’

‘I should think so, horrid creature! Fancy *her* daring!’ replied the sister nonchalantly.

Dorothy heard, and the colour mounted to her cheek.

The walk was short, but the service long and tedious, an old-fashioned performance in the matter of nasal twang, hoarse clerk, wheezy harmonium, discordant singing, and dull preacher. The occupants of the Darlington pew—a square, lined with red baize, and furnished with round and well-stuffed hassocks—looked at one another, yawned, dreamt, or slept.

Dorothy mentally compared the dry performance with the Vicar of Dronington’s impassioned address, his carefully trained choir, and the devotional frame of mind in which she had frequently revelled. Yet religion surely consisted in far other things than in a well-ordered service and a fluent speaker; surely, with all the need of spiritual guidance and refreshment she experienced, prayer and aspiration should have been more possible. The Miss Lancelots were content to smile and whisper together about a frightful bonnet in the next

pew—such flimsy mental pabulum sufficed *them*. The familiar ‘And now to God’ had been uttered, the worshippers rose gladly from their knees, the pew door was thrown open respectfully by the attendant footman, and the party filed out again through the little church-yard.

On their return luncheon followed almost immediately, at which Dorothy sat in constrained silence, the little girls on each side of her giving her ample occupation in attending to their wants and teaching them to behave.

‘You had a dull sermon I suppose, as usual,’ said Captain Limber to Miss Alice.

‘Yes, very dull,’ she said heartily.

‘I never go to church here ; it is too slow. I don’t mind an anthem at Wells Street in the afternoon ; you see everyone you know there. But a country service is absurd for educated people—it is really only good for clodhoppers, to keep them out of mischief.’

‘We always go to St. Faith’s, in London. Have you ever heard Mr. Uction ? he is delightful ; preaches sweetly, and has such *lovely* eyes. He works like an apostle, but he is *so* delicate he is always ordered abroad in the winter.’

Miss Alice sighed at the idea of her favourite

preacher's state of health, and vigorously attacked her plate of roast-beef.

‘I must say,’ remarked the Major, in a loud voice across the table, ‘there’s nothing like church to give one a good appetite. I never miss it, on purpose.’

‘How coarse!’ whispered Miss Alice to her neighbour, sending round her plate for another slice of beef.

‘We must take a walk this afternoon,’ answered Lord Darlington, who had just sat down after a prolonged and heavy spell of carving. ‘Lancelot, I must show you my new hunters; and perhaps you’d like to go to the farm, and give me your opinion about the shorthorns.’

‘Delighted, I’m sure,’ said his lordship, whose eyes were fixed on Dorothy.

‘May we go too, Captain Limber?’ asked Alice sweetly; ‘or are you going to be horrid, and make it only a man’s party?’

‘Never mind, *you* come; it is all right,’ he answered promptly.

When the little girls had finished eating, they ran off with their governess, and Dorothy heard no more of the company till tea-time, when Lady Darlington, carrying Baby John, appeared in the schoolroom.

‘You must come down as usual, you know, Dorothy,’ she said. ‘I expect you to-night. Miss Alice Lancelot plays beautifully ; you will like to hear her.’

Dorothy essayed an excuse—said she was tired, that dinner would be late, that there were already so many ladies ; but Lady Darlington would accept no refusal. With a heavy heart Dorothy arrayed herself, put on her eternal black gown with the lace tucker, and about nine o’clock took her place in the drawing-room. It was empty ; the piano stood open, the lamps were lit, the atmosphere warm and scented with hothouse flowers, the glow of wax candles bright and cheerful. Dorothy stood warming herself by the fire, when the dining-room doors flew open, and admitted a stream of gaily dressed ladies, who rustled, laughing and talking, through the rooms, till they reached the spot where the governess waited. Lady Darlington came forward, and spoke kindly.

‘My children’s governess,’ she said, presenting her to Lady Lancelot, who put up her eye-glass, and observed :

‘H’m ! I suppose you don’t teach those infants much yet—is it your first place ?’

Dorothy ignored the impertinence, and

quietly answered that the little girls did not do many lessons.

‘Well, well,’ said the majestic dowager, ‘girls learn a vast deal more than they need nowadays ; it is a fashion, like any other. I set my face distinctly against a higher education, universities and colleges, and such-like stuff. It unsexes women; they don’t have finer children, or rear them any the better. Indeed, I believe all these follies prevent a woman nursing her baby. It stands to reason, brainwork injures the health. I suppose you have passed examinations?’

‘No,’ said Dorothy, ‘not yet.’

‘H’m! they won’t do you much good. My girls were educated quietly at home by a governess; they can speak French and German, play and sing. What more does any one want?’ When Lady Lancelot had delivered this diatribe, she turned on her heel and walked away.

Dorothy took refuge on an out-of-the-way sofa, behind a book of photographs; and the ladies continued to discuss their dress, their servants, and their acquaintance, till the monotonous hum of conversation lulled Dorothy into forgetfulness. She began to dream; she thought of Blackness—of its orange-

scented conservatory, whence had been culled her bridal blossoms—of the snug little blue-room where Keith loved to smoke—of his dark eyes flashing, softening, and melting when they rested upon her, conveying a world of tender meaning—of his kisses. Then suddenly she woke up to the sound of his name pronounced by a gentleman who stood talking near her sofa with Lord Lancelot. Absorbed in her own meditations, she had not noticed their entry, nor the louder buzz of voices, and the more marked mixture of gruff and shrill tones. They had all dined well; wine had cheered men's spirits and brightened ladies' eyes.

‘So that fellow Chester has been speaking at Slowchester.’ The speaker was a red-faced, blowzy squire, who, in preparation for the morrow's hunting, had come over to dine and sleep.

‘Yes,’ answered Lord Lancelot. ‘From all accounts, he is a bit of a scamp.’

‘What has he done?’

‘No one knows exactly, but all sorts of queer rumours are about. His wife, a pretty little woman, ran away from him some months after they were married.’

‘Looks bad, doesn't it? What became of her?’ The squire's broad lips moistened at the prospect of a dainty piece of scandal.

‘Don’t know, I am sure. She is a friend of our hostess here ; perhaps she can tell us.’ The two men turned ; Lord Lancelot caught sight of Dorothy’s crimson cheeks and bent-down head. ‘By Jove,’ he added, ‘we must take care what we say ; I had no idea the little governess was so close behind us.’

The talking was presently drowned by Miss Alice’s fair fingers, who, by dint of considerable solicitation, had been persuaded to take her seat at the piano. She played without music, displaying her fine plump arms, and rolling her blue eyes round the room in search of admiration. As soon as she had finished, Captain Limber approached.

‘Miss Alice, will you play something from “Faust?” Oh, I forgot—it is sacred night here ; rather a bore, isn’t it ? Will you give us “See the conquering hero comes” ? that will be something stirring, at least.’

Miss Alice obeyed : she had a perfect repertoire of music carefully prepared for the occasion of her visit. After a little more playing she prettily urged fatigue, and retired to the sofa where the governess sat, feeling sure that in so quiet a corner flirtation would be easy.

‘Don’t you play ?’ she asked good-humouredly of Dorothy.

‘Not at all; but I like hearing you. You play well, and have a good touch.’

‘I was taught by Pauer and several other masters; but practising is a dreadful bore, especially in cold weather, when your fingers are numbed, and masters are so exacting. But then to be musical has its advantages, for if tiresome people you don’t like want to talk, you can just *thump* them into silence.’

‘It must be a pleasant gift.’

‘Yes. If you are fond of music, I’ll play to you to-morrow in the schoolroom. I suppose the piano there is shocking; but I don’t mind for once.’


She threw her head back with conscious pride, and fanned herself energetically. In a little while, according to her calculations, sure enough Captain Limber languidly strolled up to her, and took the vacant chair at her side.





CHAPTER XI.

DOROTHY GIVES CAUSE FOR SCANDAL.

N Monday there was to be a favourite woodland meet of the hounds. The ladies and gentlemen staying at Lovemere departed at an early hour, on horseback and in carriages, amidst much din and trampling of hoofs. Dorothy lunched alone with her pupils, and late in the afternoon found a pretext to run to the village. The precious envelope containing £200 pressed closely to her bosom, and her heart loudly beating, she reached the Green Man, where, however, Joynte was not visible. She had reckoned on finding him waiting for her, and felt considerably embarrassed at the presence of some tipsy-looking men slouching about near the door of the bar, with pipes in their mouths, who observed her with impertinent

curiosity. She did not like to speak to them, nor could she very well have asked for Joynte, not knowing under what alias he might be staying at the inn. To her great relief, just as she was turning away to address a servant-girl who had come out with barley in her apron to throw to a swarm of cackling fowls following at her heels, Joynte sauntered up.

‘Good-afternoon, ma’am,’ he said, lifting his ragged hat with the old jaunty deference. ‘You’ve kept your word.’

‘Here is the money,’ she said shortly, slipping the envelope into his hands; ‘it is all I have. Don’t waste it; you cannot get any more. And remember that you have solemnly promised me never again to molest Mr. Chester; it is on this sole condition that I have brought the money.’

‘I know,’ he chuckled; ‘it’s hush-money.’

‘I don’t understand what you mean,’ she said, feeling hot and conscious. ‘Can I trust you?’

‘All right—you’re a little brick of a woman! Yes, shake hands.’

Very unwillingly did Dorothy put her fingers into his skinny yellow hand; and at that instant, while she was debating how much longer conciliation was necessary, a

carriage rolled by. Its occupants were ladies : one of them turned her head—it was Julia—and cried to her companions :

‘ Dear me, mamma, how funny ! Look, there’s the governess talking to such a queer man at the public-house ! What a strange friend for her to have !’

‘ So she is,’ said her mother, turning her head also to investigate the strange phenomenon ; ‘ how very improper ! I will not fail to inform Lady Darlington of the fact. I am sure she cannot know what kind of person she is harbouring under her roof and putting in contact with her innocent children.’

Dorothy in her excitement had never noticed the carriage, and was perfectly unaware of the storm brewing for her as she bade Joynte farewell, and tripped home with a lighter heart than usual. Lady Darlington, duly apprised by the ladies of her governess’s supposed delinquency, listened in surprised but polite silence.

‘ I think you must be mistaken,’ she said, when she had heard all. ‘ My governess is a perfect lady ; in fact she—’ Lady Darlington stopped ; this was not the moment to declare Dorothy a runaway wife. ‘ I am sure she would not be likely to converse with com-

mon looking men at the door of a public-house.'

'We saw her though, I assure you,' said Julia eagerly; 'and she was very intimately talking with a man who was holding her hand as if he was very fond of her.'

'Julia, my love,' said Lady Lancelot reprovingly, 'this is not at all a proper subject for you to discuss.'

'Very well; I will inquire into the truth of it, you may be sure,' said her ladyship decisively.

'I do hope you will,' cried Julia, who had had a disappointment, with the result that it had soured her and given her a taste for hearing about scandal and *peines de cœur*.

'I wonder Lady Darlington does not see that that governess is much too pretty,' said Lady Lancelot to her daughters, when they were alone. 'She will be flirting with Captain Limber next, I suppose.'

'*He* does not admire her,' said Alice contemptuously; 'and he *does* admire some one else. Why, he rode with me nearly all day.'

'The governess is a humbug,' snapped Julia. 'I hate those downcast eyes, and the ridiculous affectation of modesty.'

‘Oh, she’s a good little thing enough,’ said Alice, with mock generosity.

‘I don’t believe she is a girl at all,’ pursued her sister. ‘I heard one of the children call her Mrs. something, but I could not catch the name. So she must be a married woman.’

‘And probably separated from her husband,’ snorted Lady Lancelot. ‘How shocking, to keep such a person about one’s children ! Elderly unmarried women, reserved and serious, make the only possible governesses. Now, Alice love, do take off your habit and rest a little before dinner. I will send you up a cup of tea. You look very tired, and will be too pale to-night for the yellow gauze.’

‘Very well, ma,’ said Alice obediently, well aware that the maternal anxiety about her health arose from no higher motive than the agreeable probability of Captain Limber’s supposed intentions.

Lady Darlington’s kind, rosy face had seldom worn so serious an aspect as on this very afternoon, when, questioning Dorothy in the schoolroom about the truth of the occurrence at the Green Man, she elicited a confirmation of Miss Julia’s statement.

‘I can’t imagine how she knew it. I never saw her, I am sure,’ said Dorothy quietly.

‘ But it is perfectly true that I was talking to a man on business this afternoon near the public-house ; and that he was—well, rather shabby, certainly.’

‘ And you shook hands with him ?’

‘ I did.’

‘ And you are not ashamed to look in my face and tell me so ? How could you do such a foolish thing ! But, of course, you can give a satisfactory explanation. Who was he ? what was his business ? was he a beggar ? Pray tell me all, that I may clear up this wretched affair, and satisfy Lady Lancelot’s shocked proprieties.’

‘ Her vulgar curiosity, you mean.’

‘ Dorothy, proceed. I am waiting.’

‘ I am sorry I cannot satisfy you ; but this is *my* secret, and I will not reveal it.’

‘ Another secret ! Oh, Dorothy, you make me very unhappy ! What will people think—what will they say ?’

‘ I regret much to make you unhappy, but I don’t care a jot what people say.’

‘ Dorothy, you are defying the world. It is a rash act, which never succeeds.’

‘ I am not defying the world. But if the world persecutes me, will insist on prying into and carping over my affairs, will credit me

with neither virtue nor judgment, takes a malicious delight in sneering at my misfortunes—what must I do? Suffer and be still, I suppose—and perhaps thank people for taking so kind an interest in me?

‘Sorrow is making you unjust. Lady Lancelot does not even know who you are. I carefully abstained from telling her, for fear of rousing any prejudices against you. Your friends care for you, dear, I can assure you. And now, will you not tell me who the man was? Was he a beggar?’

‘No; he was not exactly a beggar.’

‘A very disreputable person then. Was he, perhaps, an emissary sent you by your husband? He would not employ such a man, I am sure. If this is so, I forgive you for concealing it. I can understand your scruples.’

—‘No, no, no! I will say nothing!’ cried Dorothy, fearing lest by some mischance Lady Darlington should guess the approximate truth.

Her ladyship’s face clouded, the dimple in her firm, well-chiselled chin grew more distinct.

‘Very well, Dorothy, I will not press you any more. Only remember, if I do not know

the truth, I shall not be in a position to shield you from my friends' insinuations.'

'No; and then, I suppose, your friends will lecture you—will insist that I am a disgrace to you, and you will yield—you will ask me to leave and I shall have to go elsewhere!'

Dorothy spoke vehemently, for she felt strongly. Her gentle nature revolted against stupid injustice. Lady Darlington did not immediately answer. Perhaps she felt that in playing the Quixotic part of friend, she had drawn upon herself a sad incubus. Good-nature is sometimes very inconvenient, and the same temperament which inclines to easy amiability, tempts people to shake off the after-consequences when they are found troublesome.

'Well, it is no use talking about it any more, is it?' said Dorothy presently, growing more composed. 'These things only make one angry. When you wish to get rid of me, I hope you will tell me so plainly; but till then you must trust me, and not torture me with questions.'

Lady Darlington went away unsatisfied. Her simple faith in Dorothy's truth and innocence was shaken, doubts crowded upon her, flashes of conviction tormented her: a belief

that possibly Keith's iniquities had been exaggerated, that generosity alone kept him silent about his wife's desertion, that it was not his fault if she were cast adrift on the mercy of kindly disposed friends, took root in her mind. Who, indeed, ever heard of a woman not loudly proclaiming her own wrongs, when she had any? Dorothy's silence utterly condemned her. Lady Darlington became more and more convinced that Lord Darlington's injunction to avoid meddling between husband and wife was salutary. Gladly would she now have restored Dorothy to her people were it but feasible, for her love had received a severe shock.

Dorothy's own feelings were strangely composed of fear, bitterness, disgust, and regret—bitterness against the cruel position in which she was placed through no fault of her own; fear for Keith's future; disgust at the crime itself and the deadly consequences of shame and misery it entailed; finally, regret for her own snapped happiness and broken trust. Keith had dawned upon her lowly sphere in the first days of their acquaintance like some young god. He possessed so much charm, such beauty, such distinction; he spoke glibly of art, of letters, of the engrossing subjects

towards which her fancy and imagination aspired. He came from the great world, from the world of statesmen and philosophers and historians, from the whirl of a more active existence, which had inspired the pens and pencils of great men; he lifted her horizon; he showed her vague glimpses of a great Beyond, into which she might wander at his side. To crown all, he had given her his love, and she had loved him truly, passionately, merged herself entirely in him. And now the second self had proved false to her, and she must bar his memory from her heart, shut out the sound of his name from her ears, banish the taste of his kisses from her lips. The cold, pale spectre of Duty must be her only bedfellow.

Has anyone learnt the desperate struggle it involves, deliberately to close the door of the spirit upon all that is sweet and pleasant in life, to rein up the imagination, to forbid regret, and tightly clutch only the harsh and painful task set before one, because it is right so to do? If he has done this without one ray of hope, or spark of divine light to cheer him on the exposed path; if, fainting by the way, he has risen wearily again and again, stumbling and struggling upon his feet, and pressed

on darkly towards the dim unknown ; if he has done all this, he will know something of Dorothy's condition. 'Mine own familiar friend.' The stabs of enemies are small and trivial indeed, compared with the silent desertion of a friend in whom you have believed blindly, with all your heart and soul. Dorothy knew that from this time forward Lady Darlington's heart was estranged from her, and the knowledge hurt her deeply.

On the following day she had occasion to walk to the farm, in order to give the bailiff's wife a small parcel intrusted to her by her employer. Having delivered herself of her errand, she was returning through the shrubbery, when the pleasant fumes of a cigar floated towards her on the air. Her heart beat at the prospect of confronting some of the guests, who alone were admitted to this private portion of the grounds. But it was too late to turn back; the person, hid by an adjacent holly bush, must be close to her. Dorothy's natural reserve and shyness were now considerably enhanced by the sense of her loneliness, and of the distrust and suspicion with which most people might be supposed to regard her.

The intruder, to her surprise, turned out

to be Lord Lancelot. ‘Ah!’ thought Dorothy, ‘*he* will not trouble me; I shall simply bow and pass on.’

Up to this moment Lord Lancelot had never directly addressed her, though she had several times, both at luncheon and in the drawing-room on Sunday evenings, caught his eyes fixed very determinedly upon her. They were eyes she disliked—very bold and sparkling, and yet sly and watchful. He was a well-looking young man, with a pleasant address, and an air of self-satisfied smugness. Why, indeed, should he not have been well-satisfied? He was young, considerably spoilt, the owner of a fine property, only burdened by his mother’s large jointure and his sisters’ small fortunes; a man who might throw his handkerchief to any girl, and find her pick it up gratefully. He was in the best of humours now, for, though Dorothy did not know it, he had planned this meeting, having watched her go out, and was delighted with the success of his manœuvre. He took the cigar from his mouth, threw it among the bushes, and lifting his hat, smiled at the governess.

‘So you have been taking a walk. A nice day for a walk, isn’t it? getting a little chilly, though?’

‘I have been on a message for Lady Darlington.’

‘That must be very good for you, after sitting so much upstairs over the children’s lessons. Don’t you find teaching very tiresome?’

To her surprise Dorothy perceived that he had every intention of bestowing his company upon her, for he had turned, and now walked beside her.

‘I think you were going the other way,’ she thought it necessary to remark. ‘Please do not let me detain you.’

‘Thank you ; for a constitutional one way is as good as another. I suppose it is getting late, too. Pray do you often walk alone?’

‘Not often.’

‘No more do I. I object to my own company.’

Dorothy not answering, he continued: ‘I often think how very dull you must be here—Miss—Miss—’ but she would not help him. ‘You don’t look suited for a governess ; you seem sad. I am sure your pupils are tiresome ; little children are a dreadful nuisance, I think. And you look very sad when you sit there in your corner, so reserved and quiet, while the others are talking and laugh-

ing all round. May I sometimes come and talk to you ?

‘That would hardly be possible. I only see the guests at luncheon-time.’

‘But you take lonely walks. I could meet you, and we could spend some pleasant hours together. I should like to cheer up your life a bit.’

‘Thank you, you are very kind,’ Dorothy answered coldly.

‘Don’t walk so fast, please — what a desperate hurry you are in ! It is not yet dark, and you will not be missed.’

‘It is quite time to return. I am expected.’

‘Why, what a little slave to duty you are, to be sure ! I should not have thought Lady Darlington could be such a despot as to forbid a pretty girl like you the smallest enjoyment — at least you need not tell her ; we can keep our little secret, can’t we ? There is not a bit of harm in it, you know. Stay a little, my dear ; I have a great many things to say to you.’

Dorothy flushed angrily at his familiar speech, and instead of delaying, hastened her steps.

‘You need not be angry and put on offended airs. I assure you I take the very greatest

interest in you. I did so from the first. Of course, I never spoke of you to my sisters, for I know how jealous women are of each other; but you are far prettier than my sisters, and it is a real shame you should have to work. I can't think how your mother can allow it—you have a mother?

Dorothy was longing to shake herself free of this persistent young man, who quickened his steps to keep pace with hers, and only talked the more. She mistrusted his suave confidential manner, and his unmistakable glances of fervent admiration annoyed her intensely; but she had never before been exposed to such persecution, and she was too shy to behave with downright rudeness. However, she resolved to try a blunt speech or two, in the hopes of disgusting him.

‘Lord Lancelot, you are mistaken;’ she stopped and looked him straight in the face. ‘I really have no wish to talk to you. What satisfaction can it give you to know that you are harming my reputation and wasting your time with a poor governess? Pray continue your walk in the direction in which you were going, and leave me to return alone.’

‘You are much prettier than anyone else in the house. You do not expect me, surely,

to devote myself to Miss Mytten or Mrs. Hartshorne—women who give one the blues to look at? Besides, where, I should like to know, is the harm of passing half an hour with you? You are too careful, my little girl. I suppose you have never spoken to a man before, as you are such a little wild thing?

What was Dorothy to do? In order to release herself, must she confide her secret to him?

‘Be a little reasonable. Listen—I should like to walk here every afternoon for the next two or three days. I can easily manage an excuse to get off shooting, or else go home a little earlier. Will you come out and meet me here? I want your advice on many points, for I perceive you are a very sensible little person.’

‘Lord Lancelot, for whom do you take me?’

‘For a very pretty girl,’ he promptly answered. ‘A girl——’

‘I am a married woman!’

‘You!’ (His surprise was genuine.) ‘Then why the deuce did you not tell me so before?’

‘I would have told you had you asked me.’

‘Even so.’ (A light dawned upon his mind, and his eyes sparkled more brightly.) ‘That changes nothing; you must be separated from him!’

‘Circumstances have separated us.’

‘Well, in his absence, is there any objection to your spending a few moments in the presence of a man who admires you extremely?’

‘Because I am not ugly, is that a reason for you to insult me?’ cried Dorothy, tears of annoyance starting to her eyes.

‘’Pon my word, you are the first woman who has told me that to admire was to insult her! I adore you—*there!* You may take my word for it.’

‘This is mean of you — ungentlemanly! See, there are more ladies on the terrace. If you do not take care, they will observe us.’

‘By Jove, yes!—there *are* some people approaching. Perhaps I had better leave you, dear little piece of prudery; but we will finish our discussion another day. I intend to convince you that I love and respect you beyond the power of words. Good-bye, sweet girl!’

This had indeed been a week of bitter humiliation to poor Dorothy. Yesterday mistrusted, to-day insulted! For the future, she resolved never to take an airing except when accompanied by her pupils.

‘There is the governess!’ said Miss Julia to her mamma, as they passed the terrace.

‘I have just seen her whisk in through the back entrance, as if she had been doing something she was ashamed of; and yes, there, I see a man going off in the opposite direction. She has met him again, this time in the shrubbery!’

‘Scandalous indeed!’ answered the dowager. ‘It is fortunate we are not staying long, or your morals, dear child, would be contaminated!’

‘No, really, ma; that is not likely!’ said Julia scornfully; ‘*such* a low creature——’

‘Of whom are you talking?’ said Mrs. Hartshorne, who, strolling on in front with Miss Mytten, had caught up an interesting scrap of gossip.

‘Why, of the governess. She seems a depraved person!’

‘Who—Mrs. Chester?’

‘The governess I mean. Is that her name?’

‘Yes, Mrs. Chester. Lady Darlington brought her here out of pity.’

‘Ah, that accounts for everything—a run away wife, who has loosened all ties of religion and nature! How could we be so blind? But I do think Lady Darlington might have confided in us!’

‘Nina is very funny about it. You know

she is devoted to Mrs. Chester—a stupid, pale little thing !’

‘ I thought she was supposed to be a beauty,’ said Julia.

‘ Well, she has a charming face,’ interposed Aunt Judy, who had taken no decided part in the controversy, and was rather inclined to like Dorothy for her amiability in the matter of temperance tracts. Twice, too, she had observed her not take sherry at luncheon, unaware that this abstinence was owing to the butler’s omission.

‘ But is she a lady ?’ said Julia ; ‘ fancy going out as a governess, if she is ! I should not care for it ; she must have a low mind to leave a nice home and go and teach other people’s children for wages.’

‘ From all I have observed, I should say Mr. Chester was perfectly right to send her packing.’

‘ I thought she left of her own accord !’ Miss Mytten opened her meek grey eyes in astonishment.

‘ *She* says so, but I fancy *he* tells a very different story.’

‘ You could not expect her to speak the truth, if it told against her.’

And herewith it was unanimously decided

by the ladies that Dorothy had been expelled from her husband's house, and was in fact a very reprehensible character, whom Lady Darlington ought on no account to be allowed to harbour.





CHAPTER XII.

THE GOVERNESS IS DISMISSED.

THE little girls again walked out with their mamma on the morrow. Dorothy did not stir therefore, but kept carefully within the precincts of her schoolroom, where at least she was secure from intrusion. For in her doubtful position it behoved her to avoid all occasion of giving offence. She wished earnestly not to fly in the face of conventional morality; and where she had already overstepped the bounds of rigid propriety, sheer necessity alone had compelled her to do so. Two days elapsed. Hannah, when she brought the supper-tray, informed her that the company were beginning to leave Lovemere. Lord Lancelot, for aught she knew, might be among these departures, but she was soon destined to be disabused of

this hope by the sight of a small note lying in the corner of the tray, to which Hannah pointed with a grin.

‘For you, ma’am,’ she said ; ‘ his lordship’s valet gave it me.’

Dorothy, disgusted at the maid’s knowing look, laid the note carelessly aside until she was alone, when curiosity impelled her to open and read it.

‘ Why are you coy and silent, dear one ?’ his lordship wrote encouragingly. ‘ I have waited and wandered about to catch a glimpse of you, till I am tired. Darlington asked me to stay on, and I accepted solely in order to see you. Don’t be invisible—come soon, or write to me ; my valet is trusty, and I have “ tipped ” the maid. I count the hours until we meet again.

‘ Your devoted slave,

‘ LANCELOT.’

Dorothy read these words with kindling cheeks and rising anger. How dared he insult her ? Her pride suffered ; she chafed against her helplessness, for it is always harder to be silent than to speak. Ah, if Keith were but here ! Yet, for his sake, all

this pain and humiliation must be borne—she must not fail in her courage or her endurance now, or else he, as well as the rest of the world, would despise her.

It is astonishing what an excellent tonic is pride—how it braces the nerves and cheers the heart. She put the note in her pocket, resisting, on second thoughts, her longing to throw it in the fire. Nothing further occurred until the next day, when, the afternoon being rainy, Dorothy helped her pupils to enjoy a good game of battledore and shuttlecock in the large hall, and Lady Darlington passed through. The children sprang gaily to her side, clinging to her skirts while she kissed them fondly. A sudden thought seemed to strike her as her eyes rested on the governess, and she said :

‘Come in here a moment, please ; I want to speak to you.’

Whence comes the sudden intuition which, clutching at our hearts with the cold grasp of some uncanny monster, warns us that the crisis of our fate has come ? Dorothy mentally resigned herself to the endurance of some new misery as she followed Lady Darlington into the drawing-room and carefully shut the double doors behind her. Lady

Darlington was evidently discomposed ; she moved to the window, pulled up the blind, walked back to the chimney-piece, stirred the fire, then, with her back to it, spoke, while Dorothy waited, standing patiently. Without any effort now, Lady Darlington dropped easily into the dry tone of an employer towards her dependent.

‘ I am sorry to have to speak to you again ; it is very distressing to me,’ she began.

‘ In what way have I failed ?’ asked Dorothy, clasping her hands together and speaking in a studiously composed voice.

‘ As you always fail, as you have failed ever since I made the unfortunate suggestion that you should become my governess.’

The suggestion once so cordially made was now deemed *unfortunate*. Dorothy noted this bitterly.

‘ I believed, when I first knew you, that you were innocent and upright, that your conduct resembled your face, pleasing and lady-like. I approved of you, I pitied you. Now I begin to fear I was mistaken in all my ideas, that you have deceived and imposed upon me, and that you are unworthy of my affection. You have constantly refused to enlighten me as to your reasons for leaving your husband.

I dread to think that perhaps the cause of your reticence was purely personal. You had done wrong, and—you did not wish to confess it.'

Dorothy drew herself up and clenched her hands together firmly.

'I deny that you have any right to question me about my private affairs.'

'And have I no right to question you as to the reason why you meet low and disreputable company outside public-houses, why you hold rendezvous with my guests, and receive clandestine notes from gentlemen?'

'Lady Darlington, I——'

'Don't prevaricate — don't make matters worse. I *know* that Lord Lancelot has written to you.'

'You are quite right—he *has*. Here is his note. If he were not your friend, enjoying your hospitality, I should have already appealed to you to protect me from his insults.' Dorothy handed the crumpled note to Lady Darlington, blessing, as she did so, the impulse which had prompted her to keep it. 'You will see that he reproaches me for not responding to his invitation.'

Lady Darlington read the note without relaxing a line of the severity of her countenance.

‘The terms in which he addresses you are familiar,’ she said. ‘You have met him already, and I cannot suppose that, without encouragement on your part, he would have dared to write to you. I am grieved and disappointed in you. I thought at least you had right principles and steadiness of conduct, but I hope for the future you will profit by this lesson, if, as you say, Lord Lancelot’s attentions are distasteful to you, and be more careful.’

‘I cannot behave differently.’

‘Then, Mrs. Chester, I fear our connection must cease. I regret it extremely, but——’

‘As you please, Lady Darlington,’ responded Dorothy coolly. Not for worlds would she have begged for indulgence, stooped to plead extenuating circumstances, or disclosed aught of the heaving billows of yearning love and outraged self-respect which surged within her.

Lady Darlington hesitated a moment, looked at Dorothy, read nothing in her face but a quiet impervious expression—defiance, she thought it—and moved away.

‘When shall I leave?’ said Dorothy, following her.

‘Whenever it suits you,’ answered Lady

Darlington, with her fingers upon the handle of the door.

‘That will be at once, then.’

‘Very well.’ And Lady Darlington shut the door sharply behind her.

Left alone, Dorothy’s self-control, hitherto buoyed up by pride, forsook her. She dropped upon an ottoman and gave helpless utterance to a series of long drawn sobs—sobs that shook her fragile form, and were caused by grief, though no tears followed the physical spasm of relaxed nerves strung up to impossible tension. There was but little of conscious sorrow, of mental conflict, in this show of emotion, but a good deal of purely bodily pain, the pent up stream of long suppressed energies of revolt and despair forcing a way for itself. As the sobs subsided and the trembling ceased, she heard a low and rather cracked voice at her elbow say, ‘Don’t, my dear, pray don’t cry.’ The voice belonged to Aunt Judy, who possessed a noiseless and imperceptible style of locomotion, enabling her unnoticed to enter a room, almost as if a ghost had suddenly sprung up beside one. Dorothy took down the hands which covered her face, gulped back the last of her sobs, and looked blankly at Aunt Judy.

‘You’ve been very bad, dear,’ said the old lady, ‘but you won’t cry any more now, will you? I can’t bear to see people cry—it gives me a headache, and then I always begin to smell perfumes, as I did when my poor mother died. Here, dear, take a peppermint lozenge; it will do you good.’

Dorothy silently refused the proffered delicacy.

‘You won’t—well, then, what is it? A girl like you ought not to be so unhappy; leave that to your elders. Would it comfort you to read this tract, “Heaven our Home?” It is very nice, though, perhaps, rather more suited to widows. But it is a great favourite of the poor people—they always like it.’

She held out the tract doubtfully towards her, some instinct whispering that Dorothy’s grief lay too deep to be reached by tracts.

Dorothy took the tract, unwilling to hurt the old lady’s feelings, and while she pressed it between her finger and thumb said:

‘I am going away; Lady Darlington is displeased with me.’

‘Dear, dear!’ Aunt Judy executed a succession of noises expressive of her sympathy, like those used by coachmen for encouraging their

horses. 'Dear, *dear* me! I am very sorry, very sorry indeed.'

'I don't know that there is any cause for regret. Lady Darlington will easily find a better governess to replace me—a more learned one, I mean.'

Dorothy was anxious not to be again misunderstood.

'Oh! but indeed the little girls were very fond of you—they had begun to behave so nicely—and besides, it is for yourself, child, I am sorry; you look so young and so——'

Aunt Judy was puzzled how to describe the innately refined and distinguished air which had captivated her from the beginning.

'Where are you going? What are your plans?'

'I have none yet.'

'Are you going home? That is the very best thing.'

'No. I am not going home.'

'I mean to your mother's house.'

'No.'

'But, child, you can't wander out into the wide world by yourself. Have you money?'

'No.'

'Good and powerful friends, perhaps?'

'No. Not any to whom I should like to apply.'

‘Your mother, surely?’

‘My mother is not rich. I do not wish to be a burden to her, and there are reasons why I cannot live in her house.’

‘Child, child, you are very foolish!’ warned the old lady, shaking her head judicially; ‘but stay, why don’t you consult the clergyman—what of *him*? Mr. Maynard is such a good man.’

‘Mr. Maynard?’

Dorothy’s cowardice had deprived her hitherto of his good offices. She dreaded his stern, piercing eyes—eyes that read the weaknesses and vacillations of a man’s spirit keenly, yet were balanced by the kindly sensitive mouth, from which poured freely balm and consolation. She shrank lest, knowing nothing of her circumstances, he should solemnly enjoin her to return and reconcile herself to her husband. The clergy, as it was natural, enforced submission to lawful authority. The marriage vow of obedience had not yet become obsolete; and Mr. Maynard’s own conception of duty and self-denial was already so exalted that any lapse in others, and those his parishioners and his penitents, would scarcely be tolerated. Yet, armed with a clergyman’s recommenda-

tion, it would be easy for her to find work, if not in Slowchester, where perhaps her name and story would be known, yet in London or some more distant place.

‘You have evidently never thought of him, my dear,’ said the cracked voice, growing more cracked in the intensity of its ardour. ‘I am sure you would find religion very consoling; and it is much easier to do what is right when some one shows you the way.’

‘That is true,’ said Dorothy quietly. ‘I think I had better consult Mr. Maynard.’

‘I believe he is coming either to-day or to-morrow. I overheard Lady Darlington saying something about it; but perhaps you had better not mention it. I should not like my name brought in.’ Aunt Judy’s whole voice and appearance was so exceedingly deprecating, that it might have seemed as if she existed only on sufferance.

‘Thank you, Miss Mytten, I will be careful not to mention your name. I am so much obliged—so grateful for your kindness.’

‘And dear, you won’t take to stimulants when you feel weak and disheartened, will you? Promise me—for I have known several nice young women go to utter destruction in that way—if you are faint and want a

fillip, a refreshing cup of tea, or some soup with a thin slice of dry toast, is really far more wholesome and efficacious.'

'I will follow your advice, but indeed I am not easily tempted in that way.'

'You are temperate, certainly ; but, my dear, none of us know whether we can resist temptation till we are tried, and there is always the chance of falling.'

'Yes, truly,' answered Dorothy, as she hastened to leave the drawing-room before the reappearance of some of the company.

The change in Lady Darlington's sentiments grieved and astonished her not a little. Had she possessed greater experience of life, she would have known that easy good-humour and a genial temperament are frequently allied to unreasonable caprice, and an exaggerated sensitiveness to the opinion of others. That keenness of sympathy which comes from thorough understanding of the wants of others, needs the rough training of sorrow, the pruning of want and anxiety, before it can bring forth mature and lovely fruit. Lady Darlington acted according to her lights ; she believed Dorothy's conduct to be reprehensible, and her love could not stand against her disapprobation.

Dorothy had made known through Hannah her desire to see Mr. Maynard, and the following day found him a visitor to the quiet school-room. His deep sonorous voice and self-assured manner—the manner of a man who is at one with himself in the pursuit of a pure and lofty aim—soon restored her peace and comfort. He asked her no questions, he distressed her by no blame, he uttered no loud regrets at the shipwreck of her worldly fortunes; he simply accepted the facts laid before him, and kindly sought to make the best use of them.

‘I was half afraid of speaking to you,’ she said at last, when his gentle fatherly manners had set her quite at ease, and her eyes were again familiarized with the firm jaw, broad forehead and spiritual eyes, the tall massive figure and sombre priestly garb.

‘Why—my child,’ he answered, leaning forward a little, and knitting his eyebrows to assist vision; ‘because you were in trouble? That is the very time to seek your pastor. What does George Herbert say, “A pastor is the deputy of Christ for the reducing of man to the obedience of God.” Times of sorrow are generally times of obedience. You do not feel inclined to rebel at present?’

‘I feel weary,’ said Dorothy.

The light of the small lamp that stood on the table between them fell on her fair face, drawn and pinched in pale anxiety. The Vicar looked searchingly at her. Perhaps he read God’s ploughing in the drooping lines. He only said :

‘And what is it you wish me to do for you?’

‘Find me work, plenty of work—something to keep me from thinking.’

‘You are not afraid of discomfort?—here you have had luxury and ease.’

‘I am not afraid of discomfort.’

‘Very well. You prefer to live in Slowchester?’

‘Yes. I should think lodgings are cheap there.’

‘I am sure I can promise to find you house-room where you will be quiet and cared for. And I imagine it will not be difficult to procure you lessons. You can teach German?’

‘Oh yes. And French too, though I don’t speak it very fluently.’

‘That will do. Take heart, child. All shall be arranged for you. And when that is done, I will write.’

With a quiet and grateful heart Dorothy leant on the Vicar’s promises. Soon she

should taste independence and feel herself of some use in the world. Lady Darlington let her alone now: she never came to the schoolroom; the old chats were abandoned—a frigid good morning was all the greeting she vouchsafed Dorothy on her entrance, and the family luncheon was passed, on the part of the governess, in complete silence. Dorothy rejoiced. It was better so—there would be nothing to regret. The fine house, the dainty food, she had appraised at their right value. Her hostess's good-will she had treasured beyond its deserts, but her eyes were now opened, and she could leave without a sigh or a tear.

In less than a week Mr. Maynard wrote, saying he had engaged a lodging at Slowchester and procured two private pupils—more would no doubt follow. Thus Dorothy left Lovemere Hall, never, as she supposed, to return to it again.

‘I am sorry for the poor girl,’ Lord Darlington remarked to his wife, on the eve of her departure; ‘she looks worried.’

‘It is her own fault. Why did she behave with such levity?’ answered Nina, who now entirely shared the views suggested by her friends.



CHAPTER XIII.

RAPHAEL DINES.

‘ London.

‘ **M**Y DEAR KEITH,

‘ Is it possible? You are parted from your wife, that sweet pretty creature whom it was a joy to behold, and who seemed to love you to distraction; and you have embarked on the stormy sea of politics, in which there are a great many fish to be caught, but very few big ones worth the trouble! Well, I never fancied your marriage to be a wise speculation—there was too much heart and too little head about it; but I certainly credited you with enough worldly wisdom to avoid making it a *fiasco*. I have heard no authentic details of the affair—gossip generally lies; still “Il n’y a pas de fumée sans feu,” and I suppose

something is true. *Mon cher ami*, in that case I am sincerely sorry for you both. Why not come to town and see me? Hugh Vennaker and I—you know him? the best fellow on earth!—are living together in a cock-loft—very hard-working and cheerful and happy. He is a dear, good soul, and we have not quarrelled once yet.

‘I am getting on famously with the *Universal Review*. It is now “lancé.” The first number came out last Saturday, and we sold an unprecedented quantity the first three days. To be sure, sixpence for a compendium of universal information, heterodox opinions, and useful knowledge, is but a small sum. The public think so too, and have responded nobly to our efforts. Besides the *Review*, I am constantly writing leaders, enforcing a number of opinions entirely contrary to my own, so that occasionally I am a wee bit confused as to my own intellectual identity; but, *que voulez vous?* one must live—or die, for the matter of that. In my hours of recreation I compose, and think of nothing but quavers, with just a crotchet or two now and then by way of relief. Besides, “j’ai fait des vers, j’ai fait l’amour.” Neither of them pay, and there is nothing worth but friendship! You, my

dear Keith, are my friend, and included in the category of desirable good things. Come, therefore, to town at once. Let us eat drink and *divaguer* together. My compliments to Coote, *ce beau chasseur*, if he is with you. I think of calling my new volume of poems "Poppies and Peonies." The title is good, I think. To be sure, poppies induce sleep, and there is no use in drawing public attention to the fact that one's works are drowsy, and peonies remind one of a fat, red-faced woman. Still, one may serve a worse purpose in life than that of giving *rest* to one's friends.

'And now, Keith, once again I conjure you to "come with the lute, come with the lay;" by which I mean your violin, your low spirits, and your dyspepsia. I am sure you must be a victim to the latter, for worry disturbs the digestion. I long to see if I cannot cure the dyspepsia and the heartache together.

'Ever thine,

'RAPHAEL.'

Keith was alone when this letter arrived. Coote had reluctantly departed to the sedate charms of mother, sister, and home-shooting, and the atmosphere of Blackness was distinctly depressing. Chill October had begun

her sad reign ; sodden verdure infected the air with a rank odour ; muddy lanes became sloughs of despond ; chill mists crawled insidiously along the meadows and rose from the borders of the fairy lake, veiling the prospect with a shroud ; the sheep, damp and wretched, endured a sullen existence among the saturated pastures, bending their heads patiently. The sky was grey ; dead leaves dropped noiselessly from the trees, as though ashamed of their tedious existence ; mornings of chill white frosts were succeeded by rainy afternoons ; silence and damp reigned supreme. A vista of the charms of foreign cities rose in contrast before Keith's mind, Florence, Rome, Vienna or Paris with its gay theatres, brilliant cafés, and joyous, laughter-loving citizens, filled his memory.

He was sick to death already of the petty routine of a country gentleman's life, of the road-meetings and board-meetings, of the dull heavy peasants and still duller middle-classes. His ears ached with the lengthy orations of village politicians, to which his pretensions as a candidate for Parliament obliged him to listen with some show of patience ; he was satiated with the dry statement of facts and grievances, the shibboleth of party to which he

was entirely indifferent, and which he was bound incessantly to deliver. He was weary of thundering against Tory blunders, Tory iniquities, Tory wars; he would almost have compounded for more Irish rebellions, heavier taxation, and more honourable but expensive campaigns, could he thereby have secured eternal silence on these subjects. Palis's offer sounded tempting: even in London, smoky and murky enough at this season, there would be a stir of human life, noise, the cheerful light of gas, distraction from his own thoughts. Indeed, there was not a bit of good in a fortune, if a man spent it all in the society of clowns and green fields. As a young diplomat with a light purse and abundance of good looks, he had enjoyed life more vividly: women courted him, men envied him, the routine of dissipation left him no time to brood, but to please Dorothy he had consented to lead a domestic life, and to bury himself in England. What had been the result of his concessions, of his weak love?—she had left him! And why had she done this? Just because some exaggerated rumour of his past life had reached her knowledge. Were men then expected to be saints? Marriage condoned and whitewashed all former transgressions; and if women could not under-

stand this, it was because they were fools. Laying this sweet unction of content to his soul, Keith determined to leave his electioneering alone for the present, and to join Palis in London. A taste of town life would arrest the progress of the rust which he felt gathering round him.

This decision was promptly acted upon. Blackness was left to the care of Mrs. Nutmeg and her satellites, who were paid to feel no ennui at living in the country all the year round ; and Keith, attended by le Goui, took train to town. Palis had carefully ordered dinner, in anticipation of Keith's arrival ; and the first meeting of the two friends took place in the comfortable club coffee-room, which at this season of the year looked somewhat deserted.

“ ‘Mulligatawny-soup — codfish — hashed-venison,’ ” read out Keith from the bill of fare. ‘ You’ve done well, Raphael, upon my word ! I suppose you think country air means country appetite. I have none, I beg to warn you ! ’

Keith's face relaxed involuntarily at sight of his companion's joyous features, and of the business-like way in which he began to use his knife and fork. This was different already, and more lively than that dreary dinner at

home, when le Goui waited decorously mute behind his chair, and every mouthful was watched in the hushed silence of the dining-room by the immaculate footman, with the irritating air of a connoisseur.

‘Are you not aware that I am in low spirits, and, according to all precedent, am bound to refuse my food?’

‘In that case there will be the more for me,’ said Palis, munching systematically.

‘I suppose you consider me a fool to have thrown away all my advantages as I have done?’ Keith said, dinner being somewhat advanced.

‘That depends upon whether I consider the possession of advantages—which I suppose is your euphemistical term for a wife—desirable or not. In my case I should distinctly say “No!” in your case, “Yes!” Mrs. Chester’s beauty and gentleness predisposed one in your favour. One said to one’s self, “If she likes him, there must be good in him.” Voila! Have some venison—it is excellent; just kept long enough!’

‘Do you think my wife’s desertion will influence my election?’

‘There is no knowing. The English are queer: they have a culte for domestic life in the

abstract ; in practice, they are dissipated and unfaithful, like other nations. In England you may do what you like, provided you respect *les convenances*. Unfortunately, you have rubbed up the prejudices of the vulgar.'

'How was I to know that Dorothy would take the strong line she did? I would have wagered my life no person would succeed in shaking her faith in me. Indeed, the whole business is wrapped in mystery.'

'I suppose it was that affair of Miss Phaer's that disgusted her. She must certainly have a very jealous temperament to be envious of a dead woman. Did she know nothing about it then, and why didn't you tell her when you married? If you want a woman to believe a story, you should always tell it yourself, with your own accents.'

'Not exactly; she got scent of an old affair, something to do with a girl of low origin, whom I tried to pension off a dozen times, and who was always annoying me.'

'And the upshot of it is, you have lost your wife, and have not got rid of the annoyance.'

'Exactly; I have lost my wife, unless she returns to me.'

‘Of her own accord, that is unlikely. What is she doing now?’

‘Living as governess with Lady Darlington. The little witch has such independence, such daring. I like her the better for it. Still, it is very inconvenient when women take the bit in their mouth. She wouldn’t accept my money or my company. I sent her a cheque though, the other day, which indeed was a part of her own allowance; but I dare say she will not keep it. She says she wishes for no communication with me; she told Margaret the thought of me made her unhappy. Yet, contrary to the ordinary habits of her sex, so far as I know, she has never let fall a single word of complaint or blame of me to anyone.’

‘Then she loves you! My dear fellow, there is not a shadow of doubt of it, she loves you.’

‘And leaves me?’

‘Bah! that is the natural instinct of women—flight; they mean nothing by it.’

‘It’s damnably irritating to be snubbed by a woman,’ said Keith meditatively, ‘especially when she is your wife.’

‘Keith, I am afraid you are deteriorating greatly,’ said Palis suddenly, in a very grave voice.

‘Very probably—the fates are against me.’

‘Then, do you wish it?’

‘What nonsense! Does a man ever wish to go to the bad, though occasionally he finds the journey imperative?’

‘Keith!’ Palis leant his elbows on the table (they had now reached the stage of pears and walnuts), and looked portentously solemn. ‘Keith, why should you do yourself injustice? Your heart is not in this political work; you don’t care for it; you don’t believe in it. You’ll fail.’

‘I shall pretend to care for it.’

‘That will not do—even in business, honesty is the best policy. For myself, I make it a rule never to tell an unnecessary lie. Your whole life is a lie!’

‘Raphael!’ Keith’s eyes flashed.

‘It is not worth your while to be angry, because I don’t mean to quarrel with you; besides, it is just the difference between us, the fact that you are indifferent and nonchalant, while I am all industry and effervescence, that attracts me. I look upon you as a study.’

‘A study in black chalk, then,’ said Keith gloomily. ‘I’m so bored, so listless, no, hang it! I’m so *miserable*, I should like to cut my throat.’

‘If you are *miserable*, I have hopes of you.’

‘I once thought there was nothing so pleasant as to be rich,’ pursued Keith, in a monotone. ‘Now I have the fortune, I don’t care for it.’

‘You care for your wife?’

‘If she would be pleasant and good-tempered, and not give trouble—yes. I can’t like people who give me trouble. Jealous women are so fatiguing; you never know what will be the next grievance. Idiots! As if a man must not always come back to his wife in the end, if she will only give him time. Dorothy had no patience.’

‘Evidently for once you behaved well, and got punished for your pains. You are certainly to be pitied. I don’t see my way to the right prescription for your case, yet I scarcely think political life will prove the plaster—rather a blister, I should think. To begin with, why are you a Liberal?’

‘Why are you?’

‘That is different. I am a poor devil—a journalist, a Bohemian. I like onions, and am happy in a garret. You are rich and you are a patrician. You enjoy a palace and nice scents. The instances are not parallel.’

‘As well have a set of opinions from which

radiate warmth, change, movement, something that stirs a man's ambition and his energies, as stick to an antiquated and lifeless creed, of which the doctrines lead to sheer stagnation, and are advocated by an order which will soon be obsolete. I pity the poor from the bottom of my heart, I admire the working-classes, because I know I could not behave as well as they do, and I would gladly relieve and assist them wherever practicable.'

'Very fine sentiments, but the difficulty is to get them to believe you. Working-men have not much faith in swells. They imagine that you pet them as a hobby, and that the ideas they look upon as matters of life and death are only an occasion of emotional pastime and excitement to you.'

'I dare say ; one is generally misunderstood. But I *can* conceive it must be unpleasant to be cold and hungry. Besides, in the region of practical politics I see an end to ennui. I should like to fight against absurd class interests and foolish superstitions in the interest of humanity.'

'Humanity ! A grand word ! what does it represent ? In all classes of society the same petty aims, the same selfish desires, the same feverish excitement about trifles. No ! I am

a Liberal, not from high principle, but because, as the world is certainly tending in the direction of free-thought and democratic institutions, it is well to row with the stream. But you don't want success; you have bread already, you have no ideal goal for which men will fight and die, you have no particular wants; and yet you are a Liberal—the thing has no meaning. Your wife perhaps might have helped you, but she is gone; after all, I do believe, Keith, there is nothing to be done for you.'

'Leave me alone now, like a good fellow,' said Keith, rising impatiently, 'and let me go to the smoking-room. A cigar will be exceedingly soothing after the way in which you have peppered me.'

Palis had a reason in speaking thus plainly. When a high-bred horse is tired, it will still respond to the spur; and to prick Keith into regret seemed the most profitable way to amend the future. To be miserable meant a step on the high-road to happiness. 'Car les extrêmes se touchent.'



CHAPTER XIV.

THE WANDERER.

AND now ensued a period of calm and repose for Dorothy, such as she had not tasted since the early days of her marriage, when love had spoken in its blithest accents, lulling her into deceptive security. The Vicar had exactly comprehended her sentiments; he had hired for her two small rooms, plainly furnished, in one of the quietest streets of Slowchester. Three mornings in the week were given to one pupil, two afternoons to another; thus affording her one afternoon for leisure, study, or relaxation, besides the evenings, which she was free to spend as she pleased. The people of the house in which she lodged, simple folk, were evidently accustomed to the ways of poverty; they expressed no surprise at her

laborious industry, nor did they resent the economy she practised. The few pounds her purse contained, and the small salary earned at Lovemere (punctually paid her before departure by Lady Darlington, as though in so doing she had wiped off all debts of charity), sufficed for present wants. She was as happy as it was possible to be, parted from her husband, and oppressed by the heavy cloud of loneliness. She bravely struggled to keep her thoughts from straying towards that husband, the memory of whose words, looks, and caresses still had power to distress her.

Occasionally Margaret, like a bright meteor, broke the darkness of her solitude; but distance was a hindrance to her visits. The Vicar came frequently, and once Mrs. Parkinson arrived with a packet of tea-cakes and some warm muffatees hand-knitted in her own leisure-hours. To this kind friend Dorothy spoke as freely as she dared. Mrs. Parkinson's active sympathies, always responsive, went out specially to the poor girl in her struggle with poverty and isolation. She approved, strengthened, and advised her.

‘Depend upon it, Dorothy,’ she said, ‘it is a capital thing for a young woman to learn self-reliance. I don't pity you a bit, my

dear. You have health, strength, and capacity for work, and you are really far better off than if you were an idle fine lady, yawning from sheer lassitude and want of honest occupation.'

Such speeches suited Dorothy. Mrs. Parkinson believed in her, and that thought alone brought infinite comfort. Her mother, on the contrary, had given her but a frigid support. On receipt of the Vicar's intelligence she wrote a long rigmarole of lamentation, taking a lachrymose view of Dorothy's conduct, and concluding by assuring her that it was a married woman's duty to forgive injuries and to bear children, and exhorting her to forsake a celibate life of toil which could certainly not be deemed correct or advisable.

The days passed thus in contented duty for Dorothy, while Keith lingered in London, seeking to drown regrets and remorse in the pursuit of pleasure.

Living amongst people poorer than herself, Dorothy found many opportunities of helping them either by small gifts, kindly actions, or pleasant words; and Mr. Maynard, noticing her tact and gentle ways of dealing with the crotchety self-respect and rugged pride of the *pauvres honteux*, was led to employ her as

his almoner and assistant. The fine ladies who listened to his sermons at Dronington, coming to hear him out of curiosity, and dropping a tear out of politeness at the contrasted picture of their own luxury and the wants of their poorer brethren, entrusted him with various sums for distribution ; thus, as it were, ‘hedging’ their account with heaven. When the sick and needy at home were provided for, some of the isolated cases of silent wretchedness in Slowchester were relieved from the good Vicar’s store.

The winter promised to be a severe one ; already snow lay deep on the ground, and it was not yet Christmas. Dorothy intended to pass a few days with her mother at this festive season, but the inclemency of the weather seemed as though it would oppose a barrier to her designs. She stood one evening at the window pondering these things, and pitying all poor wretches who were homeless, while she gazed at the dreary landscape and slow-falling flakes, with her hand on the tassel of the blind, ready to pull it down and, shutting out the cold, once again light her lamp for the evening’s study. At that moment a tall figure strode up to the house and rang a loud peal at the bell.

‘Mr. Maynard! You here at this hour, and in this weather!’ Dorothy cried, when the door of her room opened and disclosed him standing on the threshold, dropping flakes of half-frozen snow hanging from his soft felt hat and thick overcoat, and melting into icy streams upon her tidy carpet.

‘I want you—I want you at once,’ he said, without further greeting. ‘Put on your bonnet immediately, and come with me.’

‘Is it to visit some poor person?’ she asked doubtfully, feeling sorry to leave her comfortable fireside on such a night, even for an errand of charity.

‘Yes, yes—of course!’ he said, imperatively waving his hand. ‘Make haste! there is no time to lose.’

Dorothy ran lightly upstairs, and soon returned equipped in walking-gear.

‘Where are we going?’ she said, tripping quickly by his side in the deserted street.

The evening was bitingly cold; blasts of icy sleet-laden air eddied around them; the crisp snow crackled under their feet. The heavens were dark and lowering; only the few twinkling lights in the gas-lamps and among the windows served as cheerful beacons to guide their path. It was not a night to

turn your worst enemy out of doors ; and yet, even as Dorothy questioned the Vicar, an answer came—an answer in the shape of a dusky mass, a mere bundle of rags, as it seemed, lying on the snow close to the blank wall of an outhouse, and which more careful investigation showed to be a woman—a woman with a narrow stream of blood flowing from her mouth, and oozing slowly along the glistening snow. Her head was thrown back as though from exhaustion ; her eyes were half closed ; her knees drawn up under the miserable clothes she wore, in search of warmth. The Vicar stooped and lifted her head gently on his arm.

‘ Poor thing ! she is worse than when I passed before and came to fetch you. She could speak then ; now she seems unconscious. Could you help me to carry her, do you think ? See—I will take her head and shoulders, and you her feet. It is not far, and you are fairly strong.’

They managed it according to his directions, and carried her up into Dorothy’s little parlour, where they laid her on the sofa. The warmth seemed to revive her ; she moved and moaned a little, and presently unclosed large senseless eyes.

‘Now you stay with her and bring her round,’ said the Vicar, ‘and I will run for the doctor.’

Dorothy knelt by the side of her strange guest, a vast compassion stirring at her heart, while she tried to read the outcast's story in her face. She was not handsome now; want and misery were too deeply inscribed on lineaments which, clothed with rosy flesh and healthful colouring, might have been good-looking. Prominent cheek-bones, sunken eyes, a drawn mouth, lips blue with cold, whence at intervals came a short hacking cough, gave but a poor impression of the girl, large-limbed and broad-cheeked, who in her youth passed as ‘a fine creature.’ Dorothy was not familiar with the marks of destitution carried to the verge of death, and the sight of it distressed her. She was glad when the Vicar returned, bringing with him a doctor.

‘Dying of consumption!’ the latter said, after careful examination. ‘She must remain where she is; have food, warmth, and quiet. I can't do much for her. She may linger some time, or go out like the snuff of a candle!’

The Vicar, to whom these sharp, curt words

were addressed, puckered his brow thoughtfully. After a while, he crossed to where Dorothy stood bending over the sick woman, and, in a quiet tone of decision, said :

‘ You will keep her here, my child.’

‘ But——’ The excuses died on Dorothy’s lips. Was she, friendless herself, to refuse hospitality to one more friendless still ?

‘ She will want very little ; we can make up a bed here, and she must immediately be relieved of her wet things.’

Dorothy obeyed. The Vicar’s commanding influence precluded all objections. She fetched everything that was necessary, helped the doctor to make the bed to his satisfaction, and undress the patient. She was soon rewarded by the sight of the sick woman lying calmly on her pillow, while, thanks to the doctor’s sedatives, the dry cough became less distressing.

‘ She will do very well now,’ said the doctor. ‘ Please to sit up with her and watch, in case there is any return of hæmorrhage ; she may be feverish too, and need drink. I will call in to-morrow morning.’

Thus saying, he departed, taking the Vicar with him ; and Dorothy remained alone, to bear the burden of her new duties. The night

to her mind was interminable, though it passed uneventfully enough. The wind howled in the chimney, the sleet beat violently against the window; sad thoughts oppressed her, shadowy visions passed before her eyes, phantoms rose to haunt and jibber in her ears. The little room, in which a bright fire burnt peacefully on the hearth, grew alive with silent presences; she could not feel alone, for the air teemed with them — hobgoblins of fancy, of fear, and of imagination. The invalid never spoke, though Dorothy, lifting her head quickly, sometimes thought she caught the sound of broken words. She only turned and moaned, and moaned and turned again, and coughed. Sometimes her breathing, growing lower and more inaudible, seemed to stop; then, when Dorothy leant forward in terror to see her worst fears confirmed, it came again in long-laboured gasps. Towards four o'clock Dorothy fell asleep in her armchair, waking with a start to find the cold light of day rapidly extinguishing the tiny flame of the night-light, which sputtered violently, as though objecting to the process, and the sick woman's eyes, wide open and now strangely brilliant, fixed keenly upon her.

‘Are you feeling better?’ said Dorothy,

rousing herself from the cold torpor which had seized her. 'I think you have slept?'

'How did I come here?' said the woman, in a harsh, strained voice—'how did I come here? who brought me? Are you really Mrs. Chester?'

'I am really Mrs. Chester,' said Dorothy, surprised at the woman's knowledge. 'You were taken very ill in the street; the Vicar and I carried you in.'

'Oh! you carried me. The Vicar is the tall parson, I suppose—a lean scarecrow.'

'He is the clergyman. But you must not talk any more now. Are you thirsty? I will make you some tea directly.'

'You carried me in,' repeated the woman slowly. 'I should have died if you hadn't. Did you know me?'

'No, I certainly did not. I think you must be a stranger here.'

'Don't try and deceive me, Mrs. Chester,' the woman cried, suddenly waking into energy. 'I *hate* you.' Then, exhausted with the effort, her head dropped back on her pillow, and a violent fit of coughing overtook her.

Dorothy supported her, kindly pressing her hand.

‘ I want to tell you——’ the woman gasped for breath ; her weakness was very great.

‘ Not now.’ Dorothy imposed silence. ‘ Not now ; you are not fit for it. Presently, you shall say what it is troubles you.’

Believing with ready tact that the sight of strangers or gaping maidservants would only still further distress her charge, Dorothy performed the necessary offices in the sick-room herself. She lit the fire, put away the lamp, and made the kettle boil. The invalid lay still, following her about the room with her sharp looks, but spoke no more. Neither did she refuse the warm cup of fragrant tea which was offered her ; and the quick spark of hatred which lit up her restless eyes at Dorothy’s approach, gradually faded before her steady gaze into a kind of weary content. When the doctor paid his visit, all was tranquil in the sick-room : Dorothy sat sewing, the invalid seemed asleep. He expressed approval of every arrangement, and noted a slight improvement in the condition of the patient.

‘ You will continue the nursing, I presume,’ he said ; and to Dorothy’s question as to whether she could leave her charge for some hours, he said, ‘ Yes, without fear.’

‘ Of course I shall be back for dinner, and

leave the medicine by her side ; but you see, I have pupils, and they cannot spare me.'

'Exactly. You are rather young to live alone ;' and the doctor took a rapid survey of her face—a doctor's survey—including doubt, observation, final diagnosis.

While this short conversation took place, the invalid offered no protest, neither did she express any wish, but watched the pair closely with the furtive glance of some wild animal seeking a device to escape from its captors. Nevertheless, the soothing influences of kindness and consideration appeared after a while to soften the ruggedness of her savage nature, Mrs. Chester being careful never to relax her attention, to attend as punctually to the invalid's wants as if she were a queen, and to trouble her by no impertinent curiosity. That she was ill and friendless constituted all-sufficient claims upon her nurse's devotion. The invalid appeared gradually to gain strength ; she could eat better, coughed less, and sat up for an hour or two occasionally. One day, seated in the cushioned armchair, after some silent observation of Dorothy, who placidly hemmed a pocket-handkerchief opposite, she broke out :

‘I suppose you are what is called a good woman!’

This was uttered defiantly, almost as if the proposition might fairly challenge contradiction. Dorothy smiled a little.

‘I suppose we are none of us *good*.’

‘Well, any way you are better than I am—so the parson would tell us.’

‘I do not know *what* you are, and it is not for me to judge.’

‘Shall I tell you, then? I’ve been what the world calls bad and unlucky—very unlucky, certainly. I’ve been mad and vindictive; I’ve had murder in my thoughts, and never done a good thing in my life. Now, Mrs. Chester, aren’t you going to shrink from me?’

‘Why should I? perhaps you have been sorely tempted.’

‘Ay! that I have. But parsons tell you temptations have nothing to do with it; if you fall, you’re a sinner. Once a sinner, always a sinner—you can never be the same as other folks.’

‘I do not think Mr. Maynard says that; he is very kind to those that have done wrong.’

‘Well, it is not for him I care, but for you, who sit there with your calm, pretty face, and are good to me, while I *hate* you.’

‘This is the second time you have said that. Have you any reason for hating me?’

‘Did you never hear of Judith, then?’

‘Never.’

Dorothy quietly broke off a new piece of cotton, and began threading her needle afresh.

‘Have you never heard of Joynte—Elias Joynte?’

Dorothy started. The woman, with malicious delight, noted the change that came over her face, the tender rose of her cheek fading away into deadliest white.

‘Joynte!’ the needle, unthreaded, dropped from her shaking fingers. ‘What have you to do with him?’

‘Well, nothing much rightly ; only we were friends at Venice, and we used to dog and watch you when you went out looking so grand and happy. You look different now—you’re not grand, and I don’t think you’re happy, or you wouldn’t sigh so often when you sew.’

‘Go on,’ urged Dorothy huskily ; feeling that if the blow must fall, it had best fall speedily.

‘Joynte told you *his* story, I know ; and I told mine one day to your husband too, but I suppose he never repeated that. You’ve heard all about Miss Phaer and her sad death, but

perhaps you don't know I was really the cause of it.'

Here a fit of coughing stopped her utterance.

Dorothy rose quietly, handed her a glass of water, and resumed her seat. Her feelings resembled those of the condemned criminal who hears his doom drop slowly from the grave lips of the presiding judge.

'Well, you see'—Judith's voice had become hoarse and toneless; she could scarcely speak above a whisper—'I loved your husband once, a long time ago, and I have never forgotten that he deceived me. I told Miss Phaer of his treachery, and she broke with him; and then I swore I'd tell you. Now you know all about it, and why I hate you. Won't you leave me, and send me packing?'

Dorothy did not speak. Her head dropped on her arms, which were crossed on the table before her. When she lifted her face it was tearless, white, and rigid, as though death had left its mark.

'Were you not sorry to have done this thing,' she managed to say quietly—'to have spoilt that poor girl's life?'

'Sorry! He had ruined mine!'

'But *she* was innocent.'

‘That was her affair. She had to suffer because she loved him.’

‘And now, now you have spoilt my life ; and you will die, perhaps soon, with all these sins on your conscience.’

‘I told you I was shamefully bad, and that you would turn me out.’ Judith appeared to glory in her wickedness.

‘I don’t know. I can’t think—I had rather not blame you ; but, oh, promise me to tell no one of this dreadful thing, *no one*—do you hear ?’

She had seized Judith by the wrist, firmly, almost harshly. Her gentleness froze into cold severity.

‘I don’t want to tell anyone else ; it was you I meant. And now, I suppose I shall be dead soon ; you had better by far have left me to die in the street.’

‘I am glad you did not die in the street.’

‘Glad ! when I’ve done my best to make you wretched ! Well, you are a rum un !’

After this Judith subsided into a kind of torpor from exhaustion ; she neither seemed to care nor to understand, nor to realize the effect of her disclosure. Dorothy gave her nourishment, and helped her back into bed as

kindly and heedfully as usual; but the last string of hope seemed snapped within her.

Mr. Maynard called in the evening. He spoke hopefully to Judith; then, looking at Dorothy, remarked that she was pale and tired.

‘You must not overdo yourself, my child,’ he said kindly; ‘surely it was about this time you had thought of paying your mother a Christmas visit. You must not lose your holiday. Why not take it at once?’

‘And what will become of her?’

Dorothy pointed in the direction of the bed. Her own personal feelings, she felt, must not interfere with her strict duty towards her neighbour.

‘I will get her a nurse. The doctor says there is no immediate danger; she only wants watching. Come now, your lessons are over to-day. Pack up at once. Go home to-morrow, where you are anxiously expected, and return on Monday; that will include Christmas-day, and enable you to pass it with your mother.’

‘Very well, Mr. Maynard; in that case I will go.’

There was no chance of meeting Keith, for he was, she understood, in London. She felt the need of rest, and her heart yearned with a child’s helpless longing for home—for her

bright little bedroom at the Angel House, and for a taste of Margaret's hearty hugs. She was weary of the hopeless struggle of life, sick with loathing of the knowledge of evil, eagerly desirous to breathe again an atmosphere of purity and sweetness, to plunge, as in a cleansing bath, into the very monotony of goodness. The old familiar sights and sounds—the village life, Mrs. Strait's grumblings, the creak of the old clock on the stairs, Sarah's forgetfulness, little Snow's joy—rushed to her mind, seen through a halo of affectionate association and coloured by the rays of grateful memory. Early next day, Dorothy left Slowchester, committing Judith to the care of an elderly pleasant-faced nurse.





CHAPTER XV.

REST FOR THE WEARY.

THAT Christmas holiday proved a moral and physical blessing to Dorothy. From the very beginning, pleasant homely sights met her eyes, and affectionate hearty greetings fell on her ears. At the door of the Angel House, whither she had walked from the station—a boy carrying her small trunk behind her—Snow ran out and welcomed her noisily, in true canine fashion; circling round and round her feet, at the imminent risk of being trodden on; dancing in front of her on his hind-legs with the grace of a courtier in a minuet; barking till he gasped for breath; then taking wild leaps in the air, catching at her dress, licking her hands, and expressing, by the most extravagant airs and

gestures, his delight at her return. Next came Sarah, courtesying and smiling; Margaret, just within, radiant and laughing; and behind, her mother, softened and kindly.

‘Poor child—poor child!’ she said, kissing her—absence having cast a pleasing veil over Dorothy’s shortcomings—‘you look pale! Now you are at home, we will soon get up your colour again.’

Margaret said nothing, but threw a passion of love into her silent clasping.

Home! Oh yes, it *was* sweet to be at home again. Dorothy looked round the quaint room, which still kept its own peculiar charm; each nook and chair seeming an old familiar friend. Then she sat down, and a sense of beatitude stole over her. Margaret, on the hearth-rug, little Snow in her lap, chatted unceasingly; her sister, reticent by nature and grown more so from her solitary life, spoke rarely.

But her lips and her eyes smiled without stint, as she enjoyed the rest. Latterly her nights had been broken, her days full of anxious labour and hurry, while she strove to combine the opposite duties of teacher and sick-nurse, so as to neglect neither; now, at least, nothing was expected of her. She could just be still. During the next few days,

Dorothy visited Mrs. Parkinson and her cats, and was treated to a full and particular account of all her benevolent schemes, and of the virtues and misfortunes of her various protégés ; read the newspaper daily to her mother, whose eyes were beginning to fail, and who liked the sound of her soft, clear voice ; and shared in endless talks with Margaret, who was never tired of talking of Johnnie Cootes' perfections, and of the thrilling adventures of flood and field to which he treated her. All these various items went to make up recreation for Dorothy ; true recreation—fresh life and vigour for body and soul. The Christmas services, too, were a special joy to her. Not that her theological views had gained in depth or lucidity, or that she was a more fervent Churchwoman in the technical sense ; but simply because she was unhappy, and it was comforting to hear of a divine love which was said never to fail.

The Vicar took for his text on Sunday, John vii. 17 ; ‘ If any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God.’ Doctrine, perhaps, she might never understand ; metaphysical problems worried and disheartened her. But to do God's will did not seem so *very* difficult, now more particu-

larly that she had given up all idea of happiness. For Keith's sake she would do her duty, and God, who was love, could not blame her for loving him still. Peacefully as a little child, she laid her head upon the pillow that night, and dreamt that in some blessed region, far away from all misunderstandings and regrets, she and Keith were walking together in a garden, hand in hand. The dream was so vivid that she could smell the scent of roses quite sweet and strong when she awoke. The next day she was to return to Slowchester. Mother and sister tried in vain to break her resolution. The sick-nurse was there in her place, they urged; the woman was no relation; she was no worse, or news of it would have reached Dorothy; the pupils were not expected to resume their lessons for some days. Where was the use of hurrying back just now, too, when the rest and change were really benefiting her? But Dorothy had a kind of conviction that rest, to be true rest, must be wedged in between two layers of hard work. She had still her task to do, and it could only be done at Slowchester.

‘I have had a real holiday,’ she said, kissing Margaret, while happy, grateful tears rose to her eyes—‘a real holiday, and I will come

again soon. You would spoil me if I stayed too long; and next time, perhaps'—this with a special intention—'*you* will have something nice to tell me.'

Margaret blushed and laughed, reluctantly allowing her sister to go free.

Dorothy had started on her journey after luncheon, so that it was dark when she reached her lodgings. She let herself in with her latch-key, and bade the boy put down her trunk in the hall as quietly as possible; stealing on tip-toe into her parlour, lest Judith should be sleeping, as she often did just before tea. To her surprise, on crossing the threshold, she heard a faint sound of whispering voices, in one of which she could distinguish the deep and low tones of a man. It was not Mr. Maynard, nor the doctor; neither of them wore a dark brown tweed suit and such neat boots. The nurse, too, was absent, and it seemed that Judith was conversing alone with a strange man.

Dorothy leant a little forward, and could see that the man had dark hair, and stood rather awkwardly with his head bent down, as men do in moments of strong emotion, when they feel a great deal and are ashamed of showing even a little. Judith was speaking now. Her

voice was very weak, and broken by constant short coughs. Dorothy could not distinguish the words, but she could see that her visitor pleated up the sheet into little puckers with one hand impatiently while he listened, and thrust the other into his breast-pocket. Presently he moved his head a little, and she recognised the pallid profile for that of Keith. Her first impulse was to flee away at once ; her next, as she was already well within the room, to shrink back into the gloom of the window-curtain. There was just a bare chance he might not notice her. But even the slight movement of the curtains had aroused his attention.

Judith ceased to talk, and seemed to be dropping off into one of her usual stupors. The hot, emaciated fingers, which she had clasped round Keith's hand, relaxed their hold when he said 'Yes, yes!' impatiently to a question she had asked him, and now she neither stirred nor spoke. Keith moved away quietly from the bed, and came close to where his wife was standing.

'Dorothy!' he said hoarsely ; 'Dorothy!'

He looked so sad, so thin, she thought—he stretched his hands towards her so pleadingly, she had not the heart to turn away from him.

Oh, how she longed to comfort him—to throw her arms about his neck and whisper in his ear she loved him ! He drew a little nearer, emboldened by her silence ; he took her hand, pressed it in his, caught her waist, and strained her to him.

‘ Dorothy ! Dorothy ! ’ he repeated.

He kissed her lips, her eyes, her hair ; it seemed as if the hunger of his love could never be appeased. She strove vainly—the whole of his movements had been so quick—to raise her head and release herself.

‘ Not here, ’ he murmured ; ‘ not here ! ’

He dragged her gently into the little passage, now nearly dark, and pulled to the door of the parlour behind him.

‘ My dear one, you must never leave me again. You are the best little woman in the world, and I want you. ’

That narrow dark passage seemed to her then to be the fittest shrine for love. How sweet his voice was, how loving his touch ! For one brief moment she would indulge this exquisite joy. Soon, very soon, they must be parted.

‘ My little one, did you think I could leave you for ever ; and had you ceased to love me ? ’

‘Oh Keith, do not speak so; it is not right.’

‘Not right that I should love my wife?’

‘It makes it so hard,’ she said, leaning pantingly against the wall, and pressing her hand to her side.

‘I want you to go away with me at once. Come, let us go!’

Dorothy’s eyes fixed themselves on the parlour door. The look was unmistakable.

‘She is dying,’ he said; ‘well, after—you will come?’

‘And help to ruin and degrade your life. If we were together you would be happy—perhaps.’

‘Yes, why not?’

Keith was ready to urge anything, to make any promise, so that he could once more get back his power over the stubborn yet fragile little creature at his side.

‘Then you would forget everything—all the sin—and the shame—and keep the money?’

‘Is that what troubles you?’ he said quickly, sternly knitting his eyebrows; ‘if we were poor, would you love me then? I would do all I could to please you.’

‘I always love you.’

‘ Well, but I mean, show your love in some practical way—come back to me, for instance. Will you promise, Dorothy ?’

The passion of love contradicted was so strong within him at that instant, that he felt almost capable of a great sacrifice.

‘ If you repent and give back the money—yes,’ she said slowly ; ‘ perhaps it would be my duty.’

‘ For God’s sake don’t talk in that cold way of *duty*. I want your love, not your duty. Kiss me again, dear ! Trust me—I shall not deceive you. *Now*, can you say yes ?’

He held her cold hands in his, which were burning. In his agitation he pressed her closely against the wall, and looked at her with strange wild eyes.

‘ Keith, do not look so—you hurt me. This is not the moment to decide so quickly. Ah, give me time. I am not sure that I can——’

The power of will seemed to have forsaken her. Those kisses had charmed away her heart, but she made no sign of yielding, for a dumb consciousness clove to her brain, whispering: ‘ Don’t give way—don’t, or you are lost.’

‘ If you hesitate, you can’t love me—I feared so, Dorothy. You are utterly cold and selfish ; a man would be an idiot to care for you. And I,

like a fool, thought for a moment of giving up everything for you.' He tossed her hands from him. 'Take your own line then; go your own way; I suppose in some fashion you get your reward. I will not trouble you again.'

She heard a sound in her buzzing ears, as from a long distance. Was it the front-door slamming? And then came silence—darkness—it was good so. Oh, how her head ached, throbbing as if knives were piercing her temples! Then a sudden ray of light, accustomed steps, a homely figure.

'Jane, is it you?' she asked, staggering forward.

'Yes, ma'am; it is time to light the gas. Why, whatever is the matter? you *do* look gashly?'

The surprise, the sudden emotion, had indeed completely overcome Dorothy. The whole thing seemed a dream: her husband's presence in the little lodging, his passionate words, the kisses he had showered on her lips and hair, his low-whispered hoarse entreaties; then the temptation, his few short sharp reproaches, and again silence. She had sent him away somehow, she never really knew how; and he had taken his dismissal

and was gone, and it was extremely unlikely that he would ever seek her again. She sat down on a low chair in the parlour, whither Jane had assisted her.

Jane, who was a hard-working general servant, on twelve pounds a year, and kept her little brothers and sisters by her earnings, wondered to herself what it could be that made 'the quality' unhappy, seeing they had enough to eat and drink, and a fine silk gown for Sundays. It must be some rottenness in the blood, she supposed—a kind of thing by which the injustice of life was made straight.

Dorothy was roused from her deadness of mind and body by Judith's voice.

'Here, come here!' she said. 'Do you know your husband has been to see me? did you wonder why?'

Dorothy nodded, for the effort to speak seemed too much exertion.

'I made parson send for him. I'm dying, I know, and I wanted to speak to him. He was to have come yesterday—the parson thought you'd be away—but something kept him. May be you met him just now; I don't know how long he has been gone, for my head is bad—I can't remember. I told him—what was it I told him?'

‘That you forgave him?’ suggested Dorothy, thinking the contrary proposition far more likely.

‘No, it wasn’t that. Yes—I remember I said you were good, and I didn’t hate you now.’

‘Did you?’

Such comfort as it was possible for Dorothy to feel in the thorough wreckage of her life came upon her: this poor outcast at least was her friend! When we have once been the victims of misconception, and have shuddered under the cold blasts of the world’s stupid hate; when our souls have been crushed to the ground in the bitterness of humiliation, how gratefully do we snatch at the smallest crumb of kindly appreciation, how the heart leaps up, the spirits revive, at the word of praise or affection, enabling us to piece together some of the fragments of our shattered self-respect, and build up again our fair character with the arm of Hope!

‘Is it right now?’ said Judith, after a pause. Her mind was evidently confused, her wits difficult to rally. ‘Are you friends? I’ve done my best. All my life—the very worst; and now at last, when I’m dying—my best.’

‘Thank you for what you tried to do—it

was kind.' The words stuck in her throat. No one's kindness could avail her now.

'Do you know what I've found out?' asked Judith again. 'You said the parson's name was Maynard?'

Dorothy thought the question so irrelevant that she feared Judith's mind was wandering.

'Maynard. Yes; he lives at Dronington.'

'Maynard; yes, that's it. He's married, and his wife's name is Sophie?'

'Yes. Who told you this?'

'I know it—the world's small enough. I had one sister, and when I went to work in London, a lady who thought her pretty and genteel gave her some schooling and started her as a governess. She wrote and told me she was going to be married to a clergyman, and I was to be sure and never trouble her again (she knew nought about Mr. Chester, but only that I had done wrong), for he was a very good man and wouldn't have anything to do with such as me. I remember now, the name was Maynard.'

'Mrs. Maynard your sister! I can scarcely believe it!'

'Why? Because she's well off, and I'm only a wretched girl! Well, the same mother bore us—a farmer's wife, too, who kept her maid-

servants, and a horse and gig to go to market. In those days many folks said Sophie was no prettier than I was, though she was always like a cat that licks itself to keep itself clean, and won't so much as cross a muddy road. Sophie always held her head high, even when mother died, and we hadn't either of us a sixpence.'

'Does Mr. Maynard know this?'

'Yes, I told him; and I mean she shall know too.'

'Why not leave the past alone? It can do you no good. You have not seen your sister for years, and it would merely distress her now.'

'I want to see her,' repeated Judith with dogged insistency.

She was not fit to argue with, and, seeing that there was no more to tell, Dorothy retreated to the fire with her needlework. And this woman was Mrs. Maynard's sister! Sophie knew of her sad fate, and had deliberately turned her off, lest the knowledge of her relationship should injure her own prospects. How true it was that she was like a cat objecting to wet her feet! Sophie always thought of her own pleasure and comfort first, and seemed anxious to convey the impression that she was

destined for better things than her surroundings. Dorothy had fancied that, a lady by birth, adverse circumstances alone had forced Sophie to become a governess. Now the truth came out. Born a farmer's daughter, she had been given her 'schooling' by the kindness of a lady; while her sister, friendless and alone in the temptations of a large city, had succumbed to a less fortunate fate. The ways of Providence were strange, certainly; but it seemed as though people's sins *did* find them out at last, retribution falling in some swift recondite manner just when they least expected it.

What would Sophie say now? and had she trusted her husband? Evidently not, and, if so, would not his wrath be great and justifiable? But then Sophie would coax and flatter him, cringing with frank humility, and say she had not meant to deceive him, and was *so* sorry; but what could a poor creature do when she had relations who were a disgrace to her? and she had feared—had thought it might turn her dear Charles's heart away from her—her dear Charles who was all the world to her. *She* did not care about public opinion—not she, but she *did* care about Charles, and what might distress him. Dorothy pictured

the scene to herself—the fawn-like glances and the sweet little caressing ways, and how Sophie would take her husband's hand, as if it were something too precious for ordinary use, and stroke it and handle it reverently, and then put it to her lips quite softly. Would these cajoleries disarm Mr. Maynard, and would he believe that in so attractive a form there could lie hidden no scheming, sly, and vulgar little soul?

Dorothy asked herself these questions, vaguely seeking for an answer, as she sat hour after hour by the fire—now rising to put fresh coals on; now giving Judith, who was very restless and feverish, some cool drink, or else smoothing out her pillows; now listening to the roaring of the winter wind, or thinking of her home, of little Snow's loving ways, and Margaret's merry disposition. In the middle of the night the patient suddenly started up, and said in quite a loud voice:

'She *shall* know it. Sophie shall know it. She is a hypocrite and a liar!'

'Hush, hush!' said Dorothy, jumping up and running to the bedside.

Judith's eyes were closed, and she was breathing heavily. Her lips moved, however,

and Dorothy, bending anxiously over her, thought they shaped the word 'Forgive.' Was it the niggard mercy of earth or the bounteous pardon of heaven the poor girl craved? Some listening angel, hovering near, heard the faint cry, and lifted the weary, sin-laden soul on the wings of Love, away from the shadows and the storms, to that divine abode where the lonely find a home and the clouds of darkness disappear in the radiance of the Everlasting Light.





CHAPTER XVI.

MRS. MAYNARD OBJECTS TO HER RELATIONS.

‘**I** WON’T believe it—I can’t believe it!’ Sophie stamped her little foot with rage.

‘My dear, what is the use of pretending the non-existence of facts we know perfectly well are true?’

‘I don’t see why you should say such disagreeable things to me.’

‘I would not say them if it were not necessary,’ answered the Vicar, quietly divesting himself of his slippers and putting on his walking-boots.

‘It’s very well for you, who fast on Friday and get out of bed in the middle of the night to say your prayers, and have worked yourself up into a state of fishy asceticism, to say that such disagreeable things are to be faced. It

is much pleasanter to forget them. And after all, I'm only a woman, and you're very hard to me.' Sophie screwed a few tears out of her handsome eyes, and wiped them up with a great flourish of her pocket-handkerchief. 'You're always talking of duty. Don't I teach in the school and attend church twice on Sundays? and didn't you prevent my going to hear the Opera Company the last time they were at Slowchester because you said it was Lent? I'm always giving up and denying myself, and losing any little bit of enjoyment I might have; and now you want me to go and see a dying person.'

'She is your sister, Sophie.'

'She is a disgrace to me, and I have not set eyes on her for years.'

'Had you told me the truth I should have sought her out long ago, and perhaps saved her, body and soul.'

'I really think people should look after themselves. Why should one always be running to save their souls? Judith had the same chances as I had; and you see *I* did not turn out a disgrace.'

'You never told me the truth,' her husband said, with a bitterness very foreign to his habitual gentleness. 'You said you had not a

relation in the world, and that your father had been a medical man at Cheltenham.'

'Well, perhaps to say Cheltenham was a mistake. What put it into my head was the fact of meeting you at Bath, and knowing that people go to both places for their gout; but if I had said, "My father was only a small farmer," you would very probably not have married me, and I did so hate being a governess. One must do the best one can for one's self.'

Now that Sophie had been found out in her untruthfulness, there was a frank cynicism about her confessions that considerably startled the Vicar, and gave him a deep insight into the chasm of want of principle which lay beneath the outer crust of propriety and virtue she had hitherto so successfully maintained.

'And so you married me to better yourself, as the servants change places,' he said, with a gathering sternness in his voice.

'Yes, as you say, to better myself.' She laughed a little, as though the drollery of the speech tickled her; 'and because, of course, I liked you very much.'

'You were utterly unfit for a clergyman's wife.'

‘Well, dear,’ she answered, with exceeding suavity, ‘I thought you were the best judge of that; and after all, a clergyman’s wife takes no vows.’

‘She is bound to be a helpmate to her husband.’

‘So I am. I teach those dirty little children.’

‘And this is why you have always shown such reluctance to the duties connected with the service of God,’ pursued the Vicar reflectively; ‘why you have been so indifferent and so lax with regard to the welfare of others—because you had *sold* yourself to me, and you found the bargain a dear one.’

‘I wish you would not say such nasty things in that hard, uncomfortable way. Why, of course, all girls marry in some such fashion: their relations or they themselves look out for a suitable young man; and when they have found him, they marry him—if they can. After all said and done, Charles, you were not such a *great* catch.’

Sophie laughed consciously, as she sat at the breakfast-table, playing with her cup and teaspoon, and watching her husband’s preparations for going out on his pastoral rounds. She was looking extremely pretty this morning,

with her dark eyes, and the sly smile gathering round her mouth ; in her *déshabillé* of pale lavender cashmere trimmed with coarse white washing lace, which, though it cost only about twopence a yard, gave her a very elegant and ladylike appearance. She was endowed with a Frenchwoman's natural talent for dress—whatever she put on suited her ; and though she spent less money than most of the ladies of Dronington, she yet contrived to have a very different and more stylish air.

Mr. Maynard had hitherto been proud of her cleverness and economy, and of the deft transformations she could effect with the commonest of materials ; but now, as his eyes fell on the dainty little figure, his lip curled in disdain. Righteous wrath smouldered within him, the wrath of the man of God denouncing the luxury and vices of the doomed cities.

‘Are you going with me to see your sister?’ he asked grimly.

‘Not to-day, Charles, please,’ she said with a little shudder. ‘It all seems so horrid—give me a little time to realize it—that she should have been picked up in the street ; taken in by strangers—a pauper, in fact !’

‘Yes, and will have a pauper's funeral

unless *her* sister pays for it !' he said with emphasis.

'Oh, Charles, I hate talking of funerals !'

'Yes ; you hate death and gloom and hardships, and everything but sin—and forget that the wages of sin is death !'

'Charles !' She covered her face with her hands.

'When I compare you with Dorothy, and remember what *her* conduct has been ; how *she* has nursed and tended the poor creature ; giving up her nights and her precious hours of daylight to the care of a perfect stranger—I see the difference between high principle and heartless frivolity.'

'Oh, you always preferred Dorothy ! I wonder you did not marry *her* instead of me ; you could have pruned her down into monastic pattern easily enough,' said Sophie, with acid ingenuousness.

'It is not fair to Dorothy to leave the whole burden on her shoulders, poor child. She has had a hard life of it hitherto ; and now you must take your share of the nursing for the rest of your sister's life.'

His voice was so stern, and he looked at her so decidedly, that Sophie felt inclined to scream or to run away. Just as she was

meditating whether a faint or a fit of hysterics would be the most desirable termination to the discussion, the maidservant, entering, handed a telegram to Mr. Maynard.

When he had opened and read it, he said, in a hard dry voice, to his wife :

‘ There, you are lucky ! You are saved the trouble and annoyance of nursing your sister. She is dead ! ’

Sophie took the unfolded paper he offered her, and read these words :

‘ *From Mrs. CHESTER to Rev. C. MAYNARD.*

‘ Judith breathed her last this morning at six o’clock. Come at once. ’

‘ What are you going to do ? ’ said Sophie, in a tone of suppressed relief.

‘ I will start immediately. I can just catch the 9.50 train to Slowchester. I suppose you have no wish to accompany me ? Your sister shall be buried here in my churchyard, and I will erect a marble cross over her grave. ’

‘ But you won’t tell people—— ’ asked Sophie tearfully.

‘ That she is your sister ? Certainly. ’ Thereupon Mr. Maynard took up his gloves and hat, and departed.

Sophie was ready to choke with annoyance. Of course she could not be expected to mourn—why should she? Judith had been dead to her these many years, and now all the village would know her history and her name—‘Judith Soames.’ Such a vulgar, common patronymic, when Sophie, now that she had altered it from the original Sophia, sounded so pretty and genteel. Secrecy was not possible, she knew. Charles was so foolish, so unreasonable, so high-strung, he would be certain to insist on their wearing mourning and refusing dinner invitations. However, she determined to obviate these difficulties as far as was possible; so she went upstairs, put on her black Sunday dress and a thick veil, and stepped across to Mrs. Parkinson’s. That good lady was kneeling on the floor, engaged in feeding her cats, and binding up the wounds of a rough terrier dog by the fireside, when she arrived.

‘See, Sophie,’ she said, ‘this dear dog has been caught in a rabbit-trap; his poor paws are so badly cut. Look how grateful he is, and how he licks my hand! There, Snap, there! down, my good fellow! Sit there, dear, wherever you can; don’t step into the cat’s milk, or on the kitten’s ball.’

Sophie, holding up her skirts with an air of ineffable disdain, at last succeeded in finding an empty chair, and began dolefully :

‘Mrs. Parkinson, a great trouble has befallen me !’

‘You don’t say so, my dear—what is it? Your maid going to leave again? What servants are coming to, I declare I don’t know. Now, Snap, be quiet, and let me tie this bandage round your poor paw.’

Mrs. Parkinson’s hands were so engaged with dog ointment, lint and basins, that a salutation was out of the question ; but she noticed, as she lifted her eyes for a moment from her task, her friend’s long-drawn countenance and sombre dress, and exclaimed again :

‘Good gracious, you haven’t lost a friend?’

‘A near relation,’ blubbered Sophie, who had her ready tears always well under command.

‘Why, I didn’t know you had any relations!’ blurted out straightforward Mrs. Parkinson, looking up with increased attention.

‘I had one. I never talked of her—for, alas ! she was a constant sorrow to me, poor girl.’

‘Well, if she is quietly and decently buried, I suppose it’s almost a relief then,’ said Mrs.

Parkinson, returning to her surgical operation.

‘She is not buried yet; she only died this morning.’

‘Good gracious! and you never went to her?’

‘I knew nothing about her. Charles is gone to see what can be arranged about—about the funeral, and all the dreadful things. He would not let me go; he knows how sensitive I am.’

‘I should say you take it all pretty quietly. Was it a sudden death?’

‘No; it was consumption.’

‘Oh, ah!’ ejaculated Mrs. Parkinson curtly.

‘She is at Slowchester. She had grown so poor—so very poor, and dared not tell us, for fear we should be unhappy; but at last the poor thing got to Slowchester, and there in the cold bare highway——’

‘The street, I suppose you mean.’

‘Charles found her. He got lodgings for her, and it seems Dorothy Chester, who was staying there, and a nurse, were very kind to her.’

‘Dorothy always would be kind to anyone. God bless her! But how came it *you* did not go and try your hand at nursing?’

‘We did not know—we had no idea it was my sister.’

‘Humph! I suppose the fact is you had disowned her. People generally do disown troublesome members of their family.’

‘It is very sad; and she is to be buried here, and have a nice marble cross, and we will plant some violets and crocuses for the spring. You’ll help me to make wreaths, you make them so beautifully.’

‘Yes, yes; shovel her under ground with plenty of fuss, she’ll trouble you no more now.’

‘How unfeeling you are, Mrs. Parkinson! my poor sister!’

‘Not a bit of it, my dear. I was thinking of a similar case I heard of only the other day, where the parents had turned off their daughter, and the poor thing threw herself into the Thames. It was very unpleasant for the family, for of course there was an inquest, and the magistrate made disagreeable remarks. What is your sister’s name?’

‘Judith—Judith Soames,’ said Sophie, bringing the vulgar name out with as much delicacy as possible. ‘And now, dear Mrs. Parkinson, I want you to let this be known in the village, and also how sorry I am—in fact, I’m so upset

I can scarcely tell what I am saying. And Charles too, with all his parish work, this additional anxiety coming upon him——'

'Dorothy seems to have relieved you of most of the anxiety hitherto.'

'Oh yes, dear girl; she's quite a sister of charity now—likes being kind and helpful, as a kind of penance and self-denial. Poor thing, her life hasn't been a success, you know. She has been foolish, very foolish; and I think it's hard upon Mr. Chester, too.'

'Now, Sophie, I won't hear a word against Dorothy. It's my belief, if ever there was a real live angel without wings on this earth, it's that blessed child. It goes to my heart to see her growing paler and thinner every day. We shall have her buried next, and a nice marble cross put over her grave, and the heart that cruel people have broken.'

'I am quite innocent of *that*, Mrs. Parkinson, at least,' said Sophie, rising. 'If Dorothy would have taken my advice—but she never did, and people must buy their experience.'

'As your sister did,' said the old lady quietly.

Sophie's good temper was imperturbable. For all answer she kissed Mrs. Parkinson, stooped down and patted the wounded dog—

who growled slightly at her, as if scenting the approach of a wolf in sheep's clothing—and, lightly and gracefully as she had entered, left the cottage.

‘She wants me to tell her story for her, does she?’ mused Mrs. Parkinson, as she called her cats to her side. ‘Wants me to make it all sweet and fair and correct for her, does she? Well, then, I *shan't*.’

Therewith Mrs. Parkinson gathered up her lint and her bandages, and went into the greenhouse to look after her silkworms.

Naturally Judith's story created some excitement in Dronington. A thrilling episode, in which a starving outcast, a pretty clergyman's wife, the interesting ill-used Dorothy, and her handsome scapegrace husband all played a part—not to mention the officiating clergyman—was indeed a set-out for gossiping tongues; the fact of Keith's visit to Judith being variously interpreted—some supposing that she had tried to act as a kind of mediator between himself and his wife; others asserting that—well, of course, it was no wonder, Judith having been no better than she should be. Others scented some further fascinating intrigue, while many unimaginative people declared all the details a tissue of lies. It

was far more likely that Mr. Chester never visited Judith at all, but only went to his wife's lodgings to implore her to return.

The funeral, too, afforded no clue, nor did it satisfy curiosity. Neither Mrs. Maynard nor Dorothy were present. The Vicar officiated in 'full canticles,' as Mrs. Strait irregularly termed it, and the procession was of the most simple and unostentatious character. Only two wreaths graced the coffin—one of white camellias, contributed by Sophie; the other of violets, sent by Dorothy. A few days afterwards a plain white cross crowned the recently upturned sod, on which was inscribed in neat letters :

JUDITH SOAMES,
BORN 18—. DIED 18—.

"*THOU KNOWEST.*"

Altogether the gossips of Dronington considered, with truth, that they had been cheated of their honest rights.

After the excitement of these events, things returned to their normal condition. Dorothy continued in her little lodging at Slowchester, diligently teaching her pupils and fitting herself by earnest study. Sophie wore black,

which suited her very well, and stayed at home for the space of a few weeks, receiving only intimate friends, and talking much of ‘The greal trial my poor sister’s death was to me—so unexpected and so sad!’ Only in the Vicar’s sermons could a marked difference be detected. They were sterner and more uncompromising in their eloquence, frequently directed against the sins of slander, lying, and uncharitableness, which he vigorously denounced as pet children of the devil; urging his hearers, at the risk of their salvation, not to delay, but to prepare for the advent of the day of wrath, ‘which cometh as a thief in the night.’





CHAPTER XVII.

WHICH TREATS OF HUNTING.

WHEN Mr. Maynard's message reached him, Keith had just returned to Blackness, with the intention of spending only a few days there, preparatory to a longer departure. The message, vaguely worded, merely stated that his presence at the bedside of a sick woman (address in Slowchester subjoined) was urgently needed. Keith's thoughts at that instant ranged far from Judith, whom he still believed at Venice, and the urgent message naturally represented itself to him as in some way connected with Dorothy. His anticipations were not unfounded, for his painful interview with Judith presently revealed that to gentle Dorothy's good offices she owed the peace and comfort of her declining days. Palis's drastic

treatment and sarcastic remonstrances had not been administered ineffectually. Keith experienced a faint kind of regret for his past life, which the sudden shock of Judith's dying presence considerably intensified. He was fortunate in possessing most of the world's highly prized gifts, yet he was not a happy man ; and in this state of mental discomfort, a discomfort which he did not care to explain to himself, the idea, almost contemptuously disposed of, occurred to him, that reconciliation with his wife might possibly bring him the coveted happiness. He was prepared to go a certain length towards confessing and repairing his mistakes, provided she would meet him half-way ; and his smouldering love burst into an ardent flame when Dorothy, looking prettier and nicer than ever after her short and refreshing holiday, again stood before him. Her resistance to his overtures therefore surprised and irritated him extremely. What on earth did she want ? Judith and her sad story would soon be laid in the grave—there would be an end of that. The whole affair had been so extremely unpleasant, that his wife might be quite sure he regretted it as much as she could possibly do ; and his intentions for the future being excellent, and his love

this time really sincere, Dorothy might surely be satisfied. Instead of this, she had inexplicably, and without reserve, thrust him from her, paying no attention to his fair promises. Those absurd fine feelings of women were really impossible to deal with. He left Slowchester in a state of fury. But gradually, as he cooled down, he began to see this thing in a different light. It was scarcely probable that now, Judith, the last obstacle to their happiness, being removed, Dorothy would perpetually continue obdurate, especially if he remained near her, so as to seize the first favourable opportunity of renewing his protestations. If, on the contrary, he went abroad again, she would perhaps gradually forget him, and learn to live alone. In addition, his social and political prospects imperatively demanded that he should not leave England again under a cloud, which (if Lady Darlington and the county people took Dorothy's part) would be of such impenetrable denseness as to defy any future efforts to dispel. He had no inclination to be regarded in the light of a pariah, and shunned by all decent people, and he wished to enjoy his riches with their attendant advantages of respect and consideration.

In fact, an atmosphere of regard and adulation was as necessary to his moral health as sunshine to his physical well-being. These and other reasons (Keith knew nothing of the coolness that had arisen between Lady Darlington and his wife) combined to induce him to alter his plans, and to decide upon remaining at Blackness, and telegraphing to Johnnie Coote to bring down his horses, and come and do a month's hunting with him.

‘Thank goodness,’ he reflected, as he despatched the invitation, ‘Coote is a matter-of-fact fellow, who will neither talk sentiment nor reproach me for my stupidity!’

Coote, shrewdly arguing that the plan would afford him good hunting-quarters and opportunities for seeing Margaret, readily accepted; and January found him, his horses, his stud-groom, and stablemen, comfortably settled at Blackness.


‘Of course you’ll hunt, old fellow?’ he said to Keith, in the course of their first *tête-à-tête* evening.

‘Well, I really hardly know how I can manage it. I don’t possess any hunters, and it’s rather too late in the year to buy them.’

‘Not a bit of it; I’ll lend you a couple till you can get some. I should think you are

just about my weight ; and I have not a doubt that, as money is no object, you will very soon have no difficulty in finding any quantity of perfect animals ready to your hand.'

This suggestion coincided with Keith's views, whose desires at that moment were limited to forgetfulness of annoyances ; that forgetfulness (not always easy of realization) seemed most likely to be attained in the pursuit of sport, hard exercise, and an obstinate search after horses. Coote made it a rule never to lose a single chance of hunting: no meet was too distant for him, no day too long, no sport too tedious. He talked sport indefatigably for twelve hours out of the twenty-four ; and the remainder of the time, when he was not dressing, Margaret, who just now fascinated him, increasingly occupied his thoughts. He had, to his great delight, discovered that the ambition of her life was to ride ; and that she was not quite a novice, owing to the fact of Mr. Horsfall's goodness in lending her his steady hunter during the summer months. Coote possessed an old horse, called 'Perfection,' who was as quiet as a lamb and as keen and clever as a cat. He tried him with a lady's saddle and a rug, and the result proving satisfactory, invited



Margaret to ride him. The ride was repeated with increasing success, until she became conversant with the horse's temper and manners. By degrees, Johnnie taught her to make Perfection jump little fences and to 'lark' across the fields. Soon Margaret, enchanted with her prowess, set no bounds to her ambition, and demanded to go out hunting.

'But you would be tired. You don't know what it means to jump and gallop for thirty or forty minutes; it requires good wind, and to be in thorough condition.'

'I am as strong as possible—never tired,' responded Margaret.

'You might tumble off—have a nasty spill, and perhaps get laughed at by some cad.'

'Should I?' said she, putting her horse cleverly at a small fence by the roadside, which he popped neatly over, and back again; returning quietly to Coote's side.

'Perfection is a rare jumper, that's certain,' said Coote admiringly; 'and you'd look very nice out hunting, on his back. The old horse has never carried a lady before, and I'll be bound he'd be as proud as a peacock.'

'Will you let me ride him, Mr. Coote? Oh do, next Tuesday, at Deddington; that's only

two miles off, you know. Everyone will be out—do now !’

Johnnie looked at her sparkling eyes, and her steady graceful seat ; he was proud of his pupil, whom he had taught everything, even to the proper way to put on her hat and hold her hands down in workmanlike style. Of course he would have no objection to letting the world see and admire her also ; more especially as it was quite certain the old horse *could* not make a mistake.

‘It is “yes,” I am sure !’ she cried triumphantly, stooping down to pat the animal’s sleek neck affectionately. ‘I knew you couldn’t refuse. And you, dear Perfection, how I shall love you if you carry me well !’

‘*If,*’ sneered Johnnie, ‘that’s a nice way to speak of him ! as if he could do anything *but* carry you well. Do you think I’d let you get on his back otherwise, Miss Strait ?’

Margaret flashed back a happy look at him, tasting the pleasant sensation that she was precious to both horse and master. The next difficulty was to gain Mrs. Strait’s consent. She had allowed a few quiet rides, thinking it as innocent a way as any other for the young people to meet ; but when it came to hunting, which meant galloping about in a state of

disorder and breathlessness amongst a heap of rough men, it was a very different matter. Hunting was ungenteel and *fast*, she was sure ; and Margaret would get a red face and a pain in her side. Besides, Mr. Coote was not a proper chaperon.

‘ Oh, mamma, Mr. Horsfall will be out, and he is a discreet old married man ; and I dare say Keith will take care of me, and he of course is our relation by marriage ; and if Lady Darlington is riding I can put myself under her wing. It can’t be unladylike, when you know she hunts at least twice a week, and the Countess of Foxborough too.’

‘ Then you must only go as far as the meet, and ride quietly along the road,’ urged her mother, relenting at the thought of a real Countess hunting.

‘ Yes, mamma ; but if the hounds go away I must follow a little, or I should see nothing. The rest of the people will do it.’

‘ With the carriages, you mean, my dear ? Well, I suppose as long as you keep near some of the ladies and the elderly people there is no harm in *that*.’

‘ Mr. Coote will tell me what I am to do. You see, if I am riding his horse I *must* conform to his directions.’

‘Yes, I suppose you must,’ said Mrs. Strait, not without some troublesome conscientious scruples, which she endeavoured to still by reflecting that Margaret was so petulant and self-willed there was no use in resisting her.

A happier little woman never breathed than Margaret, when that eventful Tuesday dawned. The weather was damp and still, auspiciously ominous of a good scent. Margaret knew all about it, for she had heard the thing frequently discussed by Johnnie. She had breakfasted, and stood in her neat habit, flicking with her whip against the window-pane, and wondering when Johnnie would make his appearance. He had promised to call for her at a quarter past ten, so that they should have time to ride quietly on, and see the field assemble. At last, after a considerable period, in which her impatience waxed greater and greater, she spied him coming down the road, riding a good-looking thoroughbred chestnut, with rather a vicious head. Behind him came a groom on Perfection, who carried a lady’s saddle, and stepped along as sedately as any park-horse. Margaret flew downstairs and met Mr. Coote at the gate.

‘I am all ready,’ she said; ‘I thought you were never coming.’

Mrs. Strait now emerged, with capstrings flying; and Sarah followed, full of excitement at the idea of her young mistress's *tour de force*. Margaret soon mounted her horse, and lightly waving her hand to the bystanders, trotted off beside Coote.

‘Now mind you follow me,’ warned her companion. ‘Don’t be in a hurry at your fences; don’t pull at his head—leave him alone. Perfection knows his business, and the best thing you can do is to sit tight and trust to his honour. I’m horribly bored at having to ride Red Miner to-day—Saladin was lame, and I couldn’t have him—he has a nasty temper, and pulls a bit; if he is tiresome you had better not follow me, but stick to Chester, who is very well mounted.’

‘I shall stay with you,’ said Margaret, prettily defiant. ‘I look upon you as my riding-master, and you must get all the credit of my performance to-day.’

‘I should mind nothing if it wasn’t for this confounded brute. I know he’ll pull my arms off; though if he is in a good humour, nothing can beat him, and there isn’t a fence too big for him.’

By this time they had reached the meet, which was in the centre of a large field.

Numerous carriages were collected there—Lady Darlington herself driving a pony-phaeton with a pair of handsome brown cobs. In the middle of the hounds was Lord Darlington, on a big bay, talking to a couple of farmers. All about were dotted horses—some led by grooms, others capering or fidgeting, to the disgust of their riders. Margaret stayed modestly in one corner, observing everything with eager eyes, and Keith took Coote's place beside her for a few moments.

‘Who is that black-eyed girl on the remarkably good-looking horse?’ asked Lord Darlington of Mr. Horsfall, who rode up at that instant. ‘She is a stranger; I haven't seen her out before.’

‘Don't you know? That is Mrs. Chester's sister, and there's Keith Chester talking to her. I think Mrs. Chester was with you as governess for some time after that unfortunate quarrel with her husband, was she not? But her sister is quite a different sort of girl—much more cheery, and handsomer, to my mind.’

‘How can she afford a hunter? I thought the family were so deuced proud, they would take nothing from Chester; he seems on capital terms with her.’

‘That is a bit of bravado on his part, I suspect, to show that the fault was not on his side, and that the family are friendly with him. As to the horse, I know him: he belongs to young Coote, who I fancy is rather sweet in that quarter just now.’

‘H’m!’ said Lord Darlington, touching his horse lightly with the spurs; ‘it’s their affair, not mine. Come up, Vixen. Hark forrard, my beauties!’

He moved on at a gentle trot, the pack following at his heels, to draw the outlying gorse covert. Almost immediately a view holloa was raised, the fox stole away, and the hounds in full cry pursued him.

Then ensued the usual scene of confusion. Johnnie, followed closely by Margaret, squeezed his hot pulling chestnut as quickly as he could through the plunging, pushing mass of riders, and jumping a small hedge, out of the road, galloped recklessly across the next field. Red Miner, seeing the way clear before him, settled down in his stride, and after a little ceased to snatch at his bit. Johnnie improved the opportunity to look round in search of Margaret, who he feared might have been separated from him by the crowd. No! She was close up behind him, her horse going

nicely and smoothly, taking the fences easily in his stride, and she herself sitting firm as a rock.

The pace had been good hitherto, the field was tailing off, but now the hounds began to falter. A little encouragement from the master soon set them right again, and they sped away across a heavier line of country to the left, intersected by brooks.

‘This will pound a good many of them,’ thought Johnnie. ‘I only hope it won’t do for me; Red Miner is not to be trusted.’

They were all together now, a small compact knot of good and forward riders, Lord Darlington, Keith Chester, Johnnie Coote, Mr. Horsfall, Margaret, a hard-riding farmer’s wife, a youth on a thoroughbred pony, and one or two miscellaneous horsemen. The fencing grew more and more difficult, the country intricate, and places uglier; occasionally they came to stiff stake-and-bound fences, having wide ditches and a bad take-off. At one of these, Mr. Horsfall’s horse slipped, and fell heavily in the ditch beyond, without injury, however, to his rider. Lord Darlington, turning to see if he were hurt, noticed the prominent position occupied by Margaret.

‘By Jove!’ he muttered, ‘how well that girl goes! She is riding a clinker!’

They were now approaching a wide brook, with sedgy rotten banks.

‘This will settle her,’ further decided his lordship; ‘she is sure to turn back, and not face it.’

Coote thought differently. He struck the spurs into his horse and sent him along at a good pace; but Red Miner threw up his head, swerved a little, took the brook sideways, and dropped his hind-legs. In a moment horse and man splashed and struggled together in the water.

‘Go along as hard as you can!’ shouted Lord Darlington, seeing Margaret, nothing daunted, prepare to ride at the brook. She tightened her reins as she had been told, and struck Perfection with her whip. He gathered himself together, went at the water as straight as a die, and cleared it safely.

‘Well done, young lady!’ cried the master, fairly stirred into enthusiasm. ‘Very well ridden! and very well done!’

But Margaret turned pale as she beheld Johnnie’s catastrophe.

‘Oh dear, he will be drowned! Some one save him! do take care, Mr. Coote!’

‘You need not be afraid—*he* is all right,’ said Lord Darlington, laughing as he rode off; ‘a bit of a wetting won’t hurt him.’

Johnnie scrambled out at that instant, hatless and dripping; and immediately, from a reaction of sentiment, Margaret laughed immoderately at the ridiculous spectacle.

‘You are not hurt, I am glad to see, so don’t mind my laughing. We must go home at once.’

Red Miner, with drooping head and heaving flanks, presented, indeed, so melancholy and penitent an appearance, that Johnnie, after a careful survey, decided that though inglorious, this was about the only alternative. One small grain of comfort was afforded them by the fact that they had had a splendid run, that Margaret’s horse had carried her beautifully, and that the hounds soon after crossed a railway, crawled slowly up a steep chalk hill, finally running the fox to ground in a hole. Having obtained a distant view of this uneventful termination to the day’s sport, Coote and Margaret quietly trotted homewards.

‘I think hunting the most delightful thing in all the world!’ said Margaret, when they stopped to walk their horses up a hill.

‘So do I,’ ejaculated Coote. ‘“Hunting is

the sport of kings, the image of war without its guilt, and only twenty-five per cent. of its danger." One thing more makes it *quite* perfect.'

'And that is——'

'Your company! Margaret, I wonder'—he stopped, and bit his moustache—'I wonder what you would say if I asked you to be my wife?'

'I should prove a very expensive one,' she answered, smiling; 'for now you have given me a taste of such enjoyment, I couldn't do without a hunter, I am afraid.'

'You shall have two, and welcome, dear Margaret; and ride all mine into the bargain, if you like,' he said promptly, putting his big brown hand caressingly over hers. 'You have made me the happiest fellow on earth. I shall never forget the meet at Deddington as long as I live; and what's more, I'll forgive that beggar Red Miner for making a fool of himself and giving me a spill, just because it gave me the chance of riding home with you.'

She laughed.

'Mind you don't catch cold, because then you'll hate me!'

'I never could hate you, darling. Why, I do think you're the greatest duck I know; and

I'm awfully fond of you! Do you think I might—— Yes, I'm sure there's nobody looking—I must just give you a kiss!

‘Certainly not. There's a dog and a man in that field; and—and I'm rather cold. Let us trot on again.’

‘Well, anyhow, if you won't give me a kiss now, I shall take an extra allowance as soon as ever I get a chance; you may rely upon that, Margaret—my own little Margaret!’





CHAPTER XVIII.

A VIOLIN'S BROKEN STRING.

‘**S**O you’re engaged to be married, Johnnie? Well, I wish you joy, and hope it may turn out well.’

‘I am certain of that,’ answered Johnnie, stretching himself contentedly, with a decided consciousness of success about him which seemed to reach even to the tips of his evening shoes. ‘I am as sure of Margaret as I am of myself.’

‘And what will your mother and sisters say, do you think? They will not like turning out of their old home for a new mistress.’

‘No.’ Johnnie gave a momentary rueful sigh. ‘I suppose they won’t; but then they always knew it was to come—and my mother is sure to get on with Margaret, and she always wished me to marry.’

‘ You think it is a case of “ every dog must have his day ” — “ le roi est mort, vive le roi. ” Your mother is anxious and willing to abdicate. I don’t know whether the certainty that a disagreeable thing must happen makes it always the pleasanter to bear. I should say it intensified the evil by the extra power of one’s imagination. But if you are quite certain that everything is for the best in this best of worlds, I have no more to add.’

‘ My mother is no fool. She was well aware I should not remain a bachelor all my life, and she will be delighted at the prospect of grandchildren.’

‘ And suppose she is not ?’

‘ Suppose—suppose nonsense !’

Johnnie’s fair face flushed a little. Of *course*, mothers always rejoiced in their sons’ happiness. Then some wicked demon whispered, ‘ Not always in the happiness *other* women gave them.’ Even mothers were sometimes jealous, and picked unnecessary holes in their daughters-in-law. Well, it could not be helped. At any rate, Johnnie’s mother had a good jointure, and he should do all in his power to make her comfortable. His mind presently reverted to more agreeable topics.

‘I think I shall hand over Perfection to Margaret,’ he said reflectively, rolling a cigarette between his fingers. ‘She will never get a horse to carry her better. Didn’t she ride him splendidly to-day, Keith?’

‘Splendidly!’ said Keith, thinking of something else.

‘How soon do you think we can be married?’ pursued Johnnie, who generally rode a subject to death.

‘Why, you only proposed to her to-day—coming home from hunting, according to your own account. You must not show such indecent haste. Take plenty of time about it, and then perhaps you will not be so unlucky in your venture as I was. Marriage certainly is a lottery.’

‘Keith!’

Johnnie leant forward, an eager question in his eyes, which he hesitated to put into words.

‘Well?’

‘I wonder if you’ll be angry if I say something that I’ve longed over and over again to say, and never dared, for fear you should think me impertinent?’

‘What is it? I promise not to be angry.’

Keith, indeed, showed no signs of irritability to-night — whether owing to the combined soothing effects of fatigue and a cigar, or else to the softer and sadder memories evoked by the mention of Johnnie's love affair, reminding him of the happiness such things had brought to him also, it is impossible to tell. Suffice it, he lolled in his armchair with languid ease, looking as though no mere words could rouse him into an expression of anger.

‘Couldn't you have cleared up that misunderstanding with your wife? It *was* only a misunderstanding—a little quarrel, surely.’

‘I am not so sure of that. She disapproved very strongly of—well, of something in my past life, of which I take a more lenient view. I dare say she was right, but she never would listen to anything. I think she hates me!’

‘And you. You don't hate her?’

Keith smoked on silently.

‘No,’ he said slowly, after a pause; ‘do you know, Johnnie, it sounds a strange thing to say, and it is certainly not like my usual disposition, but I think I like her better than ever I did. She has behaved with such firmness and consistency throughout, and one can't help respecting a woman who does that.’

They are not the usual qualities of her sex. Of course, now I have lost her, I feel I was a fool to let her go.'

'Could I—I mean could anyone do any good? You know I should be awfully glad to try my best, and with Margaret perhaps I should have a chance.'

'Thanks. You mean well, I know; but I am afraid matters are past mending.'

'Did you ever hear why Lady Darlington quarrelled with her?'

'Quarrelled! Lady Darlington with Dorothy?'

'Yes, you knew she had left Lovemere?'

'Of course I knew that; but I thought that was because she disliked being a governess. I had no idea of any other reason.'

'There was another reason—Horsfall told me. Shall I go on, or will you be angry?'

'I told you before I should not be angry; go on.'

'Well then, Horsfall says—I declare I don't know how to tell you—there was some secret she would not confide to Lady Darlington, though she pressed her ever so often: something about a man—a shabby sort of fellow—whom she used to meet clandestinely. People said he was her lover.'

‘Confound you, Johnnie, how dare you say such a thing!’

‘I told you you would be angry.’

‘No, no, I’m quite calm ; but it’s impossible, I tell you—quite impossible. Why, I know the purity of her little soul too well. She would shrink from such a thing with horror ; besides, she adored me. I tell you it’s impossible. You’ve made a mistake ; you must have misunderstood. Horsfall made a mistake.’

‘I am sorry to say I am sure I did not misunderstand him. Horsfall is a gossiping idiot, but he spoke pretty plainly. I had hoped you would be able to clear it all up by a word—that you would have the clue.’

Keith jumped up ; he was irritable enough now. He walked backwards and forwards in extreme agitation, his face working and contracting painfully. Johnnie almost regretted his interference.

‘By Jove, it’s horrible—it’s disgusting!’ interjected Keith, in sharp broken tones ; ‘they’ve maligned the purest woman on earth. So good—so innocent!’ He struck his fists together fiercely. ‘The whole pack of them be hanged for blackening my little darling’s character ! My poor little girl!’ Johnnie privately thought

that the poor little girl might have been easily saved these troubles, had not Keith's conduct driven her to prefer solitude and calumny to the advantages of his society.

'She suffered, Johnnie—I'll be bound she suffered horribly, and all alone too; there was no one by to give her help and comfort. And I, her husband, who ought to have been at her side, she thought of as the biggest wretch of all. Johnnie, my boy, this is indeed retribution!'

Keith sat down and covered his face with his hands; his shoulders heaved, a deep sob burst upwards. Johnnie was much concerned; he had never thought Keith would feel anything so much.

'Keith,' he said, 'don't take it to heart so. It's only gossip; you mustn't believe it.'

'Believe the gossip, no,' said Keith, rousing himself, but speaking low and hoarsely. 'I never believed the gossip for a moment, but it's her suffering that maddened me. I brought it all upon her, you know; if it hadn't been for me she would never have left Blackness, never have gone out as a governess, never have offended Lady Darlington. If you only knew *where* she is living now—such a miserable place—a little lodging

at Slowchester, with only one sitting-room to eat and live in !' Keith glanced around at his own cosy room, with the print-hung walls and china ornaments, the blooming hyacinths in big jars, and the luxurious chairs. He sighed. ' Johnnie, I'd give worlds to undo it all. And the pity of it is, I *can't*. One's actions are irrevocable, and we ourselves only mortal.'

' I suppose the man she met had nothing to do with—your past life ?' suggested Johnnie, seeking a practicable exit from the imbroglio ; ' it wasn't for your sake ?'

' *My* sake ! no one that *I* know would trouble her.' And even as he spoke the words, Joynte's insistence stamped itself on his memory, and he recalled Dorothy's distress at her broken promise. Yet she could surely not have met him here. Why, he was rapidly gambling and drinking himself to death in the late summer at Venice. His presence in England was extremely unlikely. Then again, why should he pursue her to Lovemere ? Why not rather have addressed himself to Keith, and worked upon his fear of revelations ? But if it were not Joynte, then indeed his sagacity was at fault. A spasm of savage jealousy seized him. Could those clear eyes have lied—that sweet mouth deceived ? The

temptation only lasted an instant, and then the image of his wife emerged, pure and lovely, from the darkening clouds of jealousy and distrust. 'I must find out about that man,' he said aloud. 'I must clear her character; the poor child has been tortured enough.'

'I would not think about it any more,' said Johnnie, whose preconceived notions were utterly upset. 'I should try and forget it all if I were you. I only thought, possibly you might have known about it; but if you don't—why, things are just where they were, and you can do no good.'

'I beg your pardon; things are not where they were before. I did not know that my wife had been unjustly accused. I did not know she had been turned out of the Darlington's house—dismissed herself, I dare say they would call it, in order to justify the proceedings; but the fact remains the same: she has been insulted and ill-treated, and I am determined to know the reason, for she is still my *wife* !'

His voice rose as he said these words, his eyes gleamed, and the hand that held his extinct cigar trembled visibly. Johnnie's attempts at soothing were about as ineffectual

as an offering of barley-sugar to a savage dog. Everything seemed to intensify Keith's wrath; he could not sit still, but marched up and down the room.

'Do sit down,' urged the placid Coote. 'You prowl around like a lion—it's fatiguing.'

'I feel like one, or rather like a tiger,' he answered curtly. 'I should like to spring upon and rend the person who maligned that poor child.'

* 'It's no use getting in a rage. You had better try to be calm.'

'How *can* I be calm, when I think—but you're right; my *feelings* will alter nothing. Oh, Johnnie, what a lucky fellow you are! all your life has been simple and straightforward. You don't know anything of the depths of passion to which some men sink—of the weakness that comes over one sometimes.'

The prowl had merged into a slow steady pacing. Keith was gradually mastering his emotion. His violin lay on a chair near. Presently he took it up and began to play, with some vague idea, perhaps, of exorcising the devil that raged within him. Softly and dreamily the bow swept the strings, breaking into the first bars of Svendsen's 'Romance.' The wild and plaintive air, with its strange

and charming harmonies, at first calmed his irritation ; but as he played, pain mingled with the pleasure, and the long-drawn sweetness vibrated acutely on his senses, as when some nerve is rudely handled. The music brought back visions—a soft clasping hand, pleading trustful eyes, golden sunset splendours covering sea and land, or moonlight rays touching the tremulous waters into magic silver—all was peaceful, tender, and divinely quiet ; but as the discords sharpened, like some weird echo from another world came memories of desperate bitterness, jealousy and hate, of sparkling Marchesas primed with lying words of flattery, of disappointment and regret. The strings seemed swept by gusts of passion, wild and uncontrolled, recklessly scattering all beauty and goodness. A string snapped suddenly with a loud, jarring crack, and struck Keith hard across the face. He put the violin down hastily.

‘Deuce take it !’ he said ; ‘I can’t play. There is no music in my soul to-night.’

‘It has made quite a red streak across your cheek,’ said Johnnie, at the sound of the broken string rising to look.

‘*Branded* me !’ sneered Keith.

‘Not quite so bad as that ; but it’s a nasty

mark. Are you coming upstairs now? Haven't you had enough? I am dead tired, and ready for bed.'

'I have had enough, as you say, and feel precisely the same as you do—dead tired—especially of myself. If only one could sleep it away—this sickening disgust of life!'

'Don't talk like that, Keith. You'll feel a different man to-morrow.'

To 'feel a different man' was precisely Keith's unspoken wish. That individuality, which most of us strive and struggle hard to keep, sometimes turns into a ghastly phantom, clogging our steps and paralyzing the forces of our will. Keith had reached that melancholy stage when he preferred almost any company to his own.

Johnnie, shouting a cheery 'Good-night!' slammed-to the door of his own apartment, and retired to enjoy some well-earned sleep, and to dream of Margaret and his new-born happiness. Keith could not sleep, and had no happiness to dream of. He paced up and down his bedroom for some minutes thoughtfully, till the walk culminated in a strong desire to try reading as a panacea for wakefulness. No book was available that he cared to read, and the magazine, in which he had glanced

at an interesting article on the history of ancient glass, lay on the table in the sitting-room. Taking up his candle, he started in quest of it. The blue room felt stifling when he entered it. He had forgotten to put out the lamp, which was still alight, spreading a circle of mellow rays around. A smell and thickness of tobacco-smoke infected the air with the odour of a tap-room. The chairs, scattered about in disorder, were pushed aside as he had left them. On one lay the violin with its broken string. He set down the candle, lifted the blind, and opened the French window. The night was calm, the heavens clear, the stars innumerable.

‘Every one of those is a world,’ he thought, as he looked upward, ‘and perhaps contains millions of eager souls ; and yet, miserable little emmets that we are, we each fancy our own self the special object of Divine interference !’

He let fall the blind, leaving the window ajar, and walked back to the table. By the side of the magazine he had come to fetch lay a volume of La Rochefoucauld.

‘I wonder if *he* would have any comfort for me now,’ thought Keith, opening it, and turning over the leaves casually. He read at random, drawing a chair near, in which to seat himself.

“ Il n’y a que ceux qui sont méprisables qui craignent d’être méprisés.” “ Notre sagesse n’est pas moins à la merci de la fortune que nos biens.” “ On pardonne tant que l’on aime.” If Dorothy had really loved me, she would have forgiven,’ he mused, reading further: “ La promptitude à croire le mal sans l’avoir assez examiné, est un effet de l’orgueil et de la paresse. On veut trouver des coupables, et on ne veut pas se donner la peine d’examiner les crimes.” “ C’est une grande folie de vouloir être sage tout seul.”’

Here was no comfort: worldly maxims only, head lacking heart; a universe governed by reason and self-interest, without one spark of kindly feeling; a mass of self-deception. And this was the philosophy on which he had formed himself, these the maxims he had approved so highly; these painfully elaborated futile theories of life, they had brought him to this, loneliness—remorse—ennui! What did refinement and taste avail, or to be a judge of bric-à-brac, and a connoisseur of old pictures, if no faith dwelt in his heart, and life was rotten at the core? He sighed for a guide, for a rock, something on which to anchor firmly his failing courage and his crumbling principles.

He looked up from his book listlessly, seeking inspiration; and as he looked, he saw a face at the window he had just unbarred, putting aside the blind. Not an answer to his unspoken prayer. A face, cold, white and deathlike; the face he saw sometimes in his dreams, and oftener in his fancy—the face of Joynte!

Speechless he stayed, watching Joynte's hand, then his head, finally his whole body, emerge from the window, and step into the room. This was no phantom of an excited brain, but the man himself, more haggard and wretched-looking than ever.

‘What brings you here?’ said Keith, when his accustomed self-control enabled him to speak with tolerable composure.

‘To see you and have a talk.’

Joynte's steps were somewhat unsteady: he snatched at a chair near. Keith stood firm and collected.

‘You're drunk!’ he said, realizing his advantages.

‘Not very! I'm sober enough to hear all you have to say. My presence is a surprise to you, I suppose—a pleasant surprise? I'll warrant your good lady said nothing about me; she's a close un, she is.’

‘What do you mean?’ inquired Keith, ominously quiet.

‘Mrs. Chester begged me to keep her secret ; she was afraid you wouldn’t be so generous if you knew of her helping me.’

‘Do I understand you to say that you took money from my wife?’

Joynte nodded, ‘Hush-money!’

‘Do you know, I’ve a mind to knock you down now, you scoundrel ! We’re alone here ; not a soul would hear your cries—the servants sleep sound !’

Joynte drew back nervously ; the light in Keith’s eyes was dangerous.

‘What good would it do you to hurt me?’ he whined. ‘Look here, Mr. Chester ; I am tired of the life I am leading. I want to reform. Those lotteries are the deuce ; you can’t count on them at all. Let’s come to terms. I’ve met a clever lawyer fellow, and he is going to act for me—take up my case, get me back my fortune. He says we have plenty of right on our side, and that you’ve no claim to the fortune of the girl you murdered.’

Keith moved again, and threateningly lifted his arm. Joynte backed a little.

‘There, let me finish. I know you won’t care to face exposure ; no one does. Even if

I fail, you would be done for; besides, it isn't at all pleasant, having all your private affairs raked up and brought into the light of day. Now, will you make terms? Be reasonable. Hand over the half of the fortune. My lawyer shall draw up a deed. I'll sign it; and we'll cry quits!

'You wretched sneak,' cried Keith, 'I'll do nothing of the kind.'

'Not for Mrs. Chester's sake?'

A sudden idea seemed to strike Keith. 'What did you say to her then? Did you tell her that—what you said just now—about Miss Phaer?'

Joynte laughed uneasily. 'I can't exactly remember what I said—a fellow is not in the witness-box always. But I can tell you she seemed to know all about it. She's mighty fond of you too, with it all. Your good looks have served you well.'

'She knew all about it, and *you* told her. Get out of my sight this minute, or I'll strike you—I will! Get out!'

Joynte gained the window pretty quickly, Keith coming close behind him, in no humour for trifling.

'Get out of my sight—get out!' he repeated.

'You shall hear from my lawyer,' said

Joynte, with as much dignity as his hurried exit would permit.

‘I don’t care a fig for your lawyer. Make haste, get out with you—go!’

Joynte fled. Keith watched him cross the terrace and disappear among the shrubs. He closed and barred the window again; his breath was coming quickly, his head swam. He put his hand out, caught at a chair, and sat down.

‘The scoundrel!’ he said between his teeth. ‘It’s all plain enough now. She believed him, she thought me a murderer!’ His limbs seemed to shrink together as he sat bowed down like an old man, his head between his hands. What should he do? What could he do? ‘My little girl,’ he moaned; ‘my poor little girl.’

This was the supreme bitterness. That he had been bad and foolish, and that she, the woman he loved, no longer believed in him. She had shrunk from him and left him, and she had paid money that the world should never hear of his guilt. She had hid his sin in her own heart, but it had stung her like the viper cherished in a man’s bosom.



CHAPTER XIX.

‘THE GRAVE OF ALL THINGS HATH ITS VIOLET.’

KEITH appeared at breakfast next morning looking pale and haggard.

‘What is the matter?’ said Johnnie, checking himself in the midst of a joyous whistle as he noticed the expression of his friend’s face. ‘Aren’t you well?’

‘Quite well, but I’m worried. I’ve heard something.’

‘Heard something! Why, you haven’t begun to read your letters yet.’

Johnnie pointed to the pile which lay beside Keith’s plate with their seals still unbroken.

‘No; I’ve thought of something. I must go and see my wife to-day.’

‘Ah, that will be a very good thing. I trust you will make it up with her.’

‘I have very little hope of that ; but you may be sure I shall do the best I can. I have not forgotten what you said to me last night.’

‘What--that about Horsfall? Well, if it has done any good, I’m glad I told you. I was afraid I had done wrong. You looked so strange after.’

‘A man may well look strange when he hears——’

Keith stopped and gulped down some tea.

‘I shall spend the morning with Margaret,’ presently observed Johnnie ; ‘my horses are all stumped up and want a rest. Besides, I ought to make my offer formally to Mrs. Strait to-day, I suppose.’

Keith thought with bitterness that it was barely a year ago since he, with a light heart, satisfied vanity, and an elastic step, had gone to make his offer also. He was bent on another errand to-day ; a more unpleasant errand ; perhaps also a fruitless one.

‘I suppose you will be home to dinner,’ said Johnnie carelessly, stretching across for the newspaper. ‘By Jove ! that fellow has won the walking match ! I never thought he would.’

'Yes ; I imagine I shall be home to dinner. It's only eleven miles to drive to Slowchester, and I have ordered the dogcart.'

'Good luck to you then, old fellow, and may you be as fortunate with Dorothy as I hope to be with her sister,' said Johnnie, putting his hands in his pockets and breaking into a whistle as he dawdled off.

Bowling along in a swift dogcart on the straight high-road, Keith found ample leisure for his reflections, and for the preparation of many convincing and eloquent speeches, which he, like the rest of men, would never utter when the crisis arrived. How should he begin? He disliked long explanations and many words. If people did not understand one another at once, endless speeches never assisted them. Would not the best and most persuasive way be just to fold her in his arms and say, 'I am come back. . You have misjudged me, but I am ready to atone'? But then he had already used words and gestures to that effect, and she had simply loosed herself from his embrace, and begged him to leave her. What if she were to do so again? True, at that time she did not understand—he had not explained ; now, with his recently acquired knowledge of her thoughts, and his

own excellent resolutions, surely it must be different.

He touched his willing horse with the whip; an unruly impatience urged him on; the road was so long, the time so tedious till he could see her and make everything right. He drove straight to the inn at Slowchester, left his groom and trap there, and proceeded on foot to the little lodging.

The answer to his question, 'Is Mrs. Chester at home?' struck him at once with an ominous chill :

'She will not return till one o'clock.'

'I *must* see her. I can wait,' he urged.

The maid hesitated.

'It is all right. I am Mrs. Chester's husband.'

'Very well, sir. Then will you step this way? But I'm afraid you will have at least an hour to wait.'

'I can wait.'

The little sitting-room had resumed its normal aspect; the bed used by Judith was removed, and the spare, shabby furniture looked shabbier still in the grey daylight. Keith noticed that there was no fire in the grate. It was laid ready, but the fact that the poor teacher could not even afford the smallest

unnecessary luxury touched him with resentful compassion. He found a match, stooped down and lit the fire. There! that was better. He had done something for her already. It seemed like the first step on the road to expiation.

The cheap prints and common green reps curtains jarred sadly on his taste; the room, too, looked stiff and tidy, and not a bit as if Dorothy had ever lived in it. He glanced at the small table in the window: some snow-drops and violets were in a glass, a pot of hyacinths stood near, and a photograph. He took it up; yes, it was his. Ah! that was more like her, the dear child! She treasured his memory then, she thought of him still. This discovery cheered him amazingly, and he waited with tolerable patience by the side of a bright fire, till the grating of the latch-key in the lock reached his quick ear, and announced her approach.

She came in rapidly, and walked up to the table before she observed him. She was dressed in grey, and had some books tied up with a strap, an umbrella, and a bunch of violets in her hand.

‘Keith!’

She started back violently.

‘Don’t be frightened, dear,’ he said gently. ‘I am come to talk to you about—a matter of business.’

With rapid regret he realized that to gain her attention he must talk of practical matters, not of sentiment.

She turned quietly to close the door, which she had left open in her surprise, put down the books and umbrella, keeping the violets in her hand, and stood a few paces off, prepared to listen. Her manner was perfectly quiet and composed; her face sad and serious.

‘You are thin, Dorothy,’ said Keith. ‘You look tired; you work too much.’

‘I have had a hard morning,’ she said, smelling at her violets.

‘It distresses me to see you look so tired.’

She gave him a little sad smile.

‘I suppose you did not come to talk about my looks.’ Keith felt himself denied even the expression of concern. ‘What was the business you mentioned just now?’

‘I have many things to tell you; but first, promise me that you will listen—that you will not want to run away directly.’

‘No, I shall not run away! I must have some luncheon presently, and then return to

my pupils. See, there's the clock—I can give you ten minutes.'

'How changed you are, Dorothy!' he said in a tone of surprise (men are always surprised at a woman's indifference), as he listened to her self-possessed talk and the absence of sentiment she displayed.

He little knew that only this very morning, as she walked along the muddy street, under the leaden February sky, she had repeated to herself with an accent of despair the words of a song—

'Hush! a voice from the far-away :
"Listen and learn," it seems to say ;
"All the to-morrows shall be as to-day.
The cord is frayed, the cruse is dry,
The link must break and the lamp must die,
Good-bye to Hope—good-bye—good-bye !"'

feeling their strange appropriateness to her present fate.

But Dorothy knew that for her own sake she must keep up a barrier of calm indifference, or her heart might speak, and then—no, it would never do.

'What was the business?' she urged again. 'It was not about money, I hope, for you know I do not need any.'

'It had something to do with it, certainly.'

I want to ask you—how came you to give Joynte money ?’

A pink flush overspread her cheek, reaching even to the neck, half concealed by the strings of her small grey bonnet.

‘Who said this? Do you know whether it is true?’

‘I know it is true—and I know what you thought—it was a mistake. I didn’t hear till yesterday that Lady Darlington had insulted you—that you had suffered for my sake; and I felt then I *must* come and tell you how grieved I am for this—that you— Won’t you relent—Dorothy?’

She dared not trust herself to speak, for she had caught the deep pain in Keith’s voice, and the tremulous fall, almost a sob, with which the sentence ended.

After a moment’s silence, she said :

‘And you want me to——’

‘Yes—to remember that we are married ; that we are one in the eyes of the world—and that I love you very dearly.’

‘And will that compensate for all the wrong that has been done?’ she said very softly.

‘Will that change anything—even if I loved you?’

‘I give you my word, Dorothy, I am inno-

cent of that—that grave charge—of what you thought. How could you? I am not—a *murderer!*’

The word was said almost in a whisper; and yet to both it seemed as if the sound of the syllables echoed round the room with the clear blast of a trumpet.

They were sitting now—he in the uncomfortable armchair beside the fire, she in a smaller one near the table, against which she gently swung and tapped the violets as she spoke :

‘Joynte told me nothing,’ she said dreamily. ‘What I know, I read in a letter—the letter in your bureau. It seemed—very clear. He was there, and saw it all.’

‘You mean Joynte—but that is a lie!’ he said eagerly.

‘A lie that he saw it?’ she said, grave reproach speaking in her eyes.

‘That is to say, what he inferred was a lie. Miss Phaer poisoned *herself*. I had nothing to do with it. I never dreamt of such a thing.’

‘But *you* brought the poison ; *she* poured it into the glass, and—and you never called for help.’

Dorothy’s timidity had given place to a keen lucidity of apprehension. She spoke in clear,

concise tones, like a counsel disentangling evidence.

‘I will tell you,’ he said quickly. ‘Miss Phaer had found out about Judith. She was fearfully jealous. We had some terrible scenes together. She vowed she would never see me again; in fact, she had written to forbid me her presence any more. I was mad and miserable, I had no money—I was in debt. I counted on my marriage to retrieve everything. My father was just dead, the estate heavily encumbered. When Ida said she would not marry me, I felt such a hateful existence was no longer possible. I bought some poison——’

‘Yes. Go on.’

Dorothy’s eyes dilated with agonized suspense; with parted lips she hung on every word, clasping her slim fingers together tightly, as though trying to control any expression of feeling.

‘I went to Miss Phaer through the little garden-gate, of which I had still kept the key, so that no one should see me enter. I told her I should kill myself unless she relented. She refused. I poured out the poison, meaning to swallow it. At that instant something stirred outside. I went to the window to

see if we were watched. When I turned round again, Ida, mistaking it for water, was drinking the poison. I lost my head. The terrible consequences, the suspicion that would fall upon me—fear, horror, overwhelmed me. What could I do? No one could save her; the poison was swift and certain. I had taken care of that. I fled. That is my crime.'

'Do you expect me to believe this—this horrible story?' said Dorothy coldly.

Keith leant back in his chair. He was ghastly pale, and wiped the drops of perspiration from his forehead.

'By all that is most holy, I swear it is true!'

'Yet, knowing of this wrong, that you had been the involuntary cause of her death, you still took her fortune, depriving Joynte of his lawful inheritance.'

'He was a lunatic and a scapegrace, and the will leaving me the money was indisputable.'

'Legally, perhaps, you were right; but——'

'Dorothy, I have repented. God knows the money has not brought me happiness.'

'Joynte has claims still——'

'He would drink and gamble everything away.'

‘But you may make amends. Oh, that money! the very thought of it stifles me! There must be *some* way of compensation.’

‘I have suffered a great deal, but I am glad now you know the truth. It is a load off my mind. It is not quite as bad as you thought, darling; is it? You will not let it part us? You will have patience—teach me to make amends.’

She sat there cold and unmoved. What amends could anyone make? Death had stepped in between. He stretched forward as if to take her hand; but he did not take it—he only bent his head down and touched it reverently with his lips. The humility of the action struck her. It was not like Keith.

‘You are innocent, you say?’ Her voice sounded weak and tired. ‘Then what has happened? Have I dreamt it all—the shame, the misery?’

‘No, it was not a dream—a mistake, dear, only. Try and trust me.’

She looked at him with slow, piercing eyes—eyes that looked beyond and far away from the pale agitated man at her side, to the old Keith, the handsome, clever ideal of her young fancy. What had she to do with *this* Keith? It seemed to her as though they were both of

them shadows, without life or meaning, speaking in cold, hollow voices, moving noiselessly in the scenes where their prototypes, passionate and loving, had lived and suffered. Nothing seemed to move her in this phantom state. She could look on and listen ; it did not concern her. What could she care ? She was dead already, and slipping away into chill, shadowy space.

‘ Help me to retrieve, Dorothy,’ the voice at her side said again. ‘ Is there not happiness in pity ?’

It had come to this ; he asked for pity !

‘ I must think,’ she said quietly, statuesque in her still composure ; ‘ I must think. It is so strange ; I must get accustomed. Leave me, please.’

‘ When may I come again ?’ he said, insisting with a persistence which gave her no sensation but that of unwelcome fatigue.

‘ I will write to you. Good-bye,’ she said.

He took his hat and made a few steps towards the door ; then he stopped, turned, and broke out passionately :

‘ Dorothy, remember my life is in your hands ; and I *do* love you !’

His eyes sought the bunch of violets, which lay on the floor, dropped by her when she rose

suddenly to bid him good-bye. He picked it up, and held it silently.

‘They are dead,’ she said, still in her dreamy voice—‘like everything else I cared for.’

‘They will revive in water, and our happiness will come back again too—if you will only let me love you,’ he answered, putting the violets in his button-hole.

When he was gone, she remained standing there, in a kind of weary dream, motionless, with her hands hanging listlessly at her side. Keith had asked for impossibilities ; he had asked her to piece together a broken life—to restore a shattered love. Did she not love him then ?—yes ; she must always love him. The feeling had got woven into the very fabric of her life ; but yet there was something different. She cherished her ideal love carefully in a secret shrine, where no rude eye dared to pierce ; but she shrank with a keen sense of pain from the love that, no longer safe and guarded, could be transformed into an everyday article of ordinary feelings, commonplace words, flimsy quarrels, and insignificant caresses. Suppose she learned to despise him ? Ah ! she had put her haunting fear into words after all ; and then perhaps the love would slip away from her, too, and she

would have nothing left. Was there no one wiser than herself to advise and help her?

‘It’s lunch-time, ma’am!’ Jane’s voice said, breaking upon her reverie, as she thrust a somewhat grimy face in through the doorway. ‘Shall I bring in the tray?’

‘Yes; you can bring it,’ said Dorothy, returning with a sudden thrill to common things.

All the day long she went about mechanically, giving her customary lessons, explaining and reiterating with unfailing patience; but the shadows and the perplexity clung about her always. She could not sleep at night; for, when she closed her eyes, she saw before her in the thick darkness Keith’s discomposed features—his dilating pupils, and his sensitive nostrils; she heard his broken voice, and the passionate words, ‘*I do love you, Dorothy!*’ She wished to do what was pleasant; she meant to do what was right. But it was there precisely that her fine perceptions failed her. What *was* right to choose—peace and solitude for herself? sorrow and disappointment for Keith? or else to share the burden bravely with him, and try what could be made of their wrecked happiness? This seemed an affair of duty more than of feeling: in which direction lay the duty? There was the knotty point. Perhaps Mr. Maynard could solve the

difficulty: he who saw everything irradiated by the light of his own holy enthusiasm.

Not many days after, one Saturday afternoon, the Vicar, responding to her wish as expressed in the little urgent note she had sent him, sat by her fireside.

‘You sent for me,’ he asked, when he had drunk his tea, and a constrained silence fell upon them; ‘did you want to speak about yourself?’

‘I wonder—I wonder if crooked things can ever be made straight?’ she said irrelevantly.

‘Are you speaking of yourself, or of others?’ he said, looking straight before him into the ruddy caverns of the fire.

‘Of others.’

‘Do you *wish* to help them?’

‘Yes,’ she answered, after a moment’s hesitation. ‘Yes, I think I wish to help them; but life seems so difficult!’

‘It is difficult,’ said the Vicar; ‘it is meant to be difficult and full of hard problems; it is not meant to be a bed of roses.’

‘I thought it easy once,’ she said, with a little touch of regretful bitterness in her voice; ‘but I have found out my mistake.’

‘You loved *things*, not people,’ he said quietly; ‘*there* lay your mistake.’

‘How do you mean? I do not understand.’ She fixed her serious eyes upon his calm face. ‘You loved the brightness, and the happiness, and the feeling of expansion that came to you like a revelation; you delighted in your own appreciation of intellect and the sense of shared sympathy.’

‘Yes, I wanted to be happy,’ she said with a sigh; ‘and I was happy, too, but it did not last.’

‘Those were the *things* I speak of: you loved *them* first, and then you loved the people who procured you those enjoyments; and now that you have lost your playthings, and the unconscious gladness that permitted you to prize them is gone, the people in their turn seem different.’

‘But if they *are*—if one has worshipped a false ideal, must one continue to worship it for ever?’

‘There is no *for ever* in this world. You need not worship an ideal if it be a false one, but you can learn to feel tenderness for the *real* thing, that which is true, and has its beauty too, as well as the other.’

‘But if it is *unworthy*?’ she said in a low voice, with her eyes bent down on the gaudy, common carpet.

‘Then *make* it worthy,’ he said, his face lighting up with a flash of spiritual fervour.

They did not speak again immediately; they were both thinking deeply. Dorothy was repeating to herself, as if it were a lesson, ‘But can I—can I—is it possible?’

Suddenly she spoke.

‘I suppose religion ought to help one, but even that is compassed with difficulties. If one asks questions and speculates, people call one unorthodox; and they talk of doctrine as if it were some strange, erudite riddle.’

“‘If any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine whether it be of God,’” repeated the Vicar slowly, as though in response to his own thoughts.

‘Ah! I see,’ she said, the shadow passing away from her eyes, and some of the listless languor fading from her face; ‘you preached about that once at Christmas, I have not forgotten—it is in the *doing* that the *knowing* comes to us. Thank you, Mr. Maynard; you have answered my question.’

There was some sweetness left in life after all, then; the pain of endurance led by hard and jagged steps to the glorious rapture of sacrifice; the flowers might bloom again—upon a tomb!



CHAPTER XX.

MAY-TIME.

MR. FLINT stood on the steps of Blackness when Keith drove up, moody and ill at ease.

‘What is it, Flint? I don’t want to do business to-day.’

‘One moment, Mr. Chester, please; I am sorry to trouble you, but if you could spare me one moment, just one, I have something important to say to you.’

Chafing at the agent’s importunity, Keith led the way into the blue-room.

‘Now, what is it?’ he said, leaning languidly against the chimney-piece.

‘The fact is,’ said the agent, seeming considerably perturbed, ‘an unpleasant circumstance has occurred. I want to ask you if you know anything of a man, a stranger to

the people here, who was found dead on the railway this morning, crushed by a passing train. In his pocket was discovered this letter addressed to you, and I brought it at once to save time and find out if you can give us any information respecting him. He was evidently drunk, and in that condition got upon the line, for an empty brandy-flask was lying by his side.'

Mr. Flint held out a letter. Keith opened and read it. When he had finished, he said, without emotion:

'I knew the man: he was half-mad, a dangerous kind of fellow; in fact, was once shut up in a lunatic asylum: latterly he had taken to gambling and drink. It was a very natural end to his career.'

Even as he spoke, a sickly smile passed over Keith's face at the ghastly irony of fate. Only this very morning Dorothy had entreated him to make amends, to restore the fortune to Joynte; and now the latter lay crushed and mangled, a soulless corpse, silent in the eternity of the irrevocable. He crumpled the paper between his fingers. 'There is nothing in this,' he said; 'it is only a line to ask me to see him.' Joynte must have written the letter before the nocturnal interview, and

kept it in his pocket when it was of no further use.

‘Had he any relations, do you know—anyone that should be communicated with?’ said Mr. Flint, thoughtful and business-like.

‘None that I know of. He was an American.’

‘His name?’

‘Elias F. Joynte.’

‘Thank you, Mr. Chester. I do not think I need detain you any longer. I shall let you know when anything further is required of you.’

Mr. Flint bustled out, and left Keith leaning against the mantelpiece, with as set and still a face as the marble itself. The nightmare that had haunted his life was dissolved; no one could harm him now; his claim to the money was not likely to be disputed; he was in peace, alone, alone with the ghosts of the past. Would they gibber and haunt him again with pale beckoning fingers and dry mocking lips, or were they laid in the grave of their dead hopes for ever? Then his thoughts reverted to Dorothy, to the woman who loved him in spite of everything; for he knew, yes, he was sure she loved him—her sad eyes, her trembling voice revealed it.

Would this make any difference to *her*? No restitution was attainable, no public obloquy likely now; and if she pardoned—oh, there could be no *if* surely!—then his life could be radically changed, spiritually transformed in the vivifying warmth of her love, and the fatal memories float away—far away on the ocean of time. He must write to her at once and tell her; yes, he must write.

It was the month of May. The warm-scented atmosphere was full of the odour of lilacs and thorn; butterflies danced and hovered over the sunny grass-plot, rejoicing in their little harmless lives, and the lark lifted his song to heaven.

Dorothy paced slowly in the garden of the Angel House, thinking not wholly unpleasant thoughts; for a sweet smile curved her sensitive lips, and her fingers moved caressingly over two letters she held open in her hand. We may peep over her shoulder and read them :

‘DEAR DOROTHY’ (said the pink missive),

‘We parted somewhat coldly, I remember, but you are too good and sensible to bear malice. I want to tell you how sorry I am I

ever misjudged you ; but it was really owing to your extraordinary secrecy and reserve, for I *do* think you might have trusted me. I understand now that the shabby man you met at the Green Man public-house—an action which shocked dear Lady Lancelot so much—was an old hanger-on of your husband's, whom you assisted with money, which was very charitable and pretty of you ; and had you only said so straightforwardly at once, of course no one would have dreamt of finding fault with you. Lord Lancelot, too, has since told me that he was mistaken in his idea of you, and that you were rather prudish than otherwise in your behaviour to him ; he has asked me to make his humble apology to you if he gave any offence. At the time he met you, and paid you some silly compliment or other, which you know is a way men have, he was not aware you were Mr. Chester's wife.

‘ After this explanation, which I trust is sufficiently satisfactory, let us be friends again ; and when your husband and you are reconciled, and living happily at Blackness—which I hear is a probable contingency—both Buffie and I hope you will pay us a visit. Mind, it must be a very long one, for we shall have a great deal to talk about. And

now, my dear Dorothy, believe me to be,
as always,

‘Your very affectionate friend,

‘NINA DARLINGTON.’

The other letter contained only two lines,
but Dorothy’s eyes lingered over them
strangely:

‘DOROTHY,

‘When may I come? You said you
would write. I am waiting.

‘KEITH.’

Slowly and meditatively Dorothy again
read these brief words, in which she recog-
nised the passionate hope of a man’s life. It
was the anniversary of her wedding-day: just
so had the larks sung; just so had the lilacs’
scent stolen over her quickened senses; just
so had she waited—then.

She had written ‘Come.’ And even as she
read the letters traced by his hand, he might
be near; his steps would not lag now, she
knew; the little gate would open with a
click. She looked up. Yes! He was there,
standing with the sunshine beaming on his
grave features, their delicate beauty refined by

mental pain, and the dark eyes glowing hopefully.

She held out her hand to him, and he took it silently, leaning over it with a kind of reverent courtesy.

‘ Mine, Dorothy,’ he said in a low, vibrating voice ; ‘ mine really, at last !’

She looked at him, her eyes shining clear with tremulous love, as of one who had travelled far into the land of sorrow, and seen the beckoning star of hope that lies beyond the shadows. Her lips moved. He bent to listen.

“ If any man shall do His will, he shall know of the doctrine whether it be of God.” ’

THE END.

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